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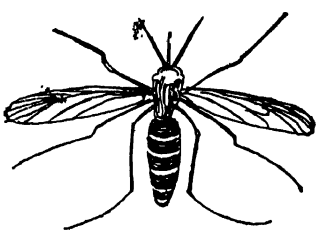
MOSQUITO COAST

An Account of a Journey
through the Jungles of Honduras

By

PETER KEENAGH



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To
my Father and Mother

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE Province of La Mosquitia is a very large area, chiefly unexplored ; most of it is covered by thick and all but impenetrable jungle. The author and his companion during their journey saw a little of it and were fortunate enough to find several tribes of Indians, but time was very short and with the equipment at their disposal they were barely able to scratch the surface of the vast expanse of unknown territory.

In addition to this neither the author nor Mr. Nigel MacDermott, who went with him, had the slightest scientific knowledge of any kind. For these reasons let no learned conclusions be drawn by the reader from the material of this book ; and let him understand clearly from the start that the expedition was no more than an unjustified piece of elaborate and protracted inquisitiveness.

I am much indebted to the Editors of *The Times* for permission to reprint material which appeared in their columns during December 1936 and January 1937 ; to Mr. Nigel MacDermott for some of the photographs ; to Mr. Sholto O'Rourke for reading the proofs ; and finally to all those who gave us invaluable help and advice both before we started and during our journey.

Chapter One

THE ROAD

FROM the Caribbean coast there are three ways of reaching Tegucigalpa, which is the capital of Honduras. One can fly precariously for two hours in a very old aeroplane, one can ride five days on a mule, or one can travel with jolting determination in the *baronesa* along the Indian hunting trail which many years of use and courtesy have dignified as The Road. The *baronesa* is a singular vehicle which is found only in Spanish Honduras : it has its counterpart in the Nicaraguan *condesa*, but outside of Central America it has no relatives among wheeled conveyances. The *baronesa* is a jaunty-car, very low and almost obscenely wide, built on some ancient and infallible American motor-car chassis. In common with the cars of all Spanish countries, it is driven by the combined efforts of two boys of seventeen or eighteen, who have previously removed all those parts of the mechanism designed to prevent noise. The *baronesa* rarely fails to complete a journey : where oxcarts and mule-trains are held up, and The Road is invisible under the muddy swellings of the rivers, the *baronesa* still manages to struggle through, her ancient engine kept dry by strips of old tyres and her intake extended vertically, like a periscope, four or five feet in the air to outwit the

floods. No other wheeled traffic can travel on The Road, even during the driest season : it is out of the question. Enormous boulders are strewn along it, unmoved since the days of Pizarro, and the bridges that once spanned the seven streams that separate Tegucigalpa from the Caribbean are gone, destroyed by floods, hurricanes, and the activities of those promoting or preventing revolutions. To the traveller who is used to English roads, The Road of Honduras is incredible : it is much less of a road than the worst impassable declivity on the road-maps. The construction of the Honduran Road, however, is a tremendous achievement. It crosses swamps, savannas, and deserts : it circles mountains and digs through them, it runs carelessly through the widest parts of enormous rivers. In no place along its length could its building have been easy, for the country has been revolution-ridden for as long as the oldest inhabitants can remember, and State subsidies for public works have been few and small. Money has, from time to time, been set aside for the improvement of The Road, but the difficulties which road-building entails in the tropics make the work very costly and the sums tempting : and it is not hard to guess how far aside some of the money was set.

The progress of the *baronesa* is further impeded by the presence of innumerable graves which stand annoyingly sacrosanct in the middle of the path. It is the native custom to bury a traveller where he falls, and it is considered very uncharitable to do otherwise. A great many Hondurans have died on The Road, each

buried and marked by a rough wooden cross, which is supported by a pile of stones. After a burial, every passer-by throws a stone on to the grave : this pile of stones supports the cross permanently and protects the corpse from the ravages of wild dogs and tiger cats. In places The Road is ridiculously cluttered up with graves, for much of the guerrilla warfare that breaks out at election time is centred around strategic points on The Road. Honduran travellers are very strict about honouring the dead, and a peasant on his way to another village will sometimes spend hours finding a suitable stone to put on the grave of a friend. An American engineer, some years ago, saw fit to move some stones from The Road to help him in some task of construction he had in hand while prospecting in the mountains : he was quite ignorant of Honduran customs and Spanish, and insisted on taking the convenient piles of stones from The Road. He was shot to death the next day by a native who was apparently drunk, and there was nobody to build a pile of stones over his grave : the vultures made a much cleaner and less obstructive tombstone for him. The drunken Honduran was arrested as a matter of course, and was subsequently liberated as easily. Life and death are both very cheap in Honduras, for the maximum prison sentence for murder without any excuse at all is six months in a special army company. For those who have any excuse, or can prove provocation, or who have friends and relations in the Government, the sentence is considerably less.

The origin of the *baronesa* is not known in Honduras.

Perhaps it came from Nicaragua, which boasted a road long before the Hondurans had built one : perhaps it was introduced by the enterprising groups of English and American adventurers who invaded the republics of Central America after the war. The name, however, was given to it locally, either to honour or ridicule a certain German Baroness who bears a very well-known name indeed, and who lived for many years in isolated splendour in a native hut near the Caribbean coast. The Baroness was installed in the country well before the war, but her story remains her secret : she was one of the most interesting and incredible of the mysteries of the Caribbean coast. She was very fat, and her temper was tremendous, and her title passed to the mechanical *baronesa* many years ago. The legend has it that her husband, a cruel monster somewhat decorated by Central American imagination, brought her to Honduras and threatened to leave her stranded on the coast. The Baroness, who was a woman of action as well as one who knew her own mind, promptly killed him and from that moment forward never left the scene of her crime, which was celebrated with revelry and dancing by the populace. The only features the Baroness had in common with the *baronesa* was her extreme width : but this was said to be very remarkable and was indeed the salient characteristic of both Baroness and 'bus.

The approaches to the Mosquito Coast of Honduras and Nicaragua are difficult. Political and legal barriers protect one of the wildest parts of the earth from

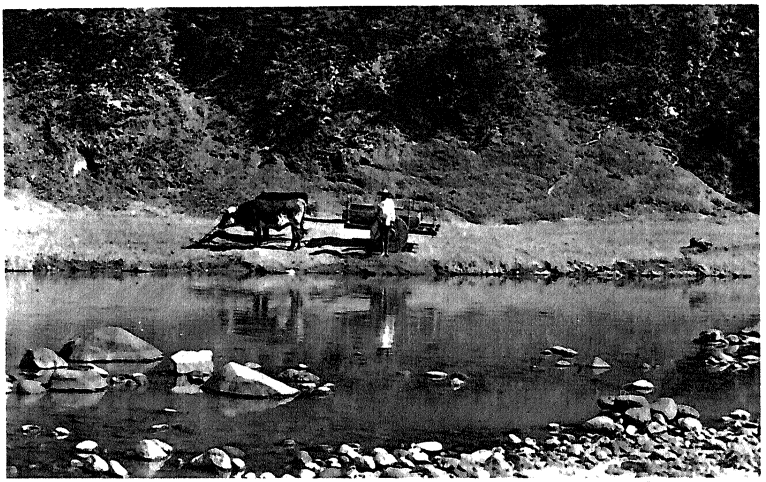
marauding strangers who might be up to no good. La Mosquitia, as the unexplored part of Honduras is called in Spanish, is protected property and is under the very special jurisdiction of the President of the Republic, who in official *communiqués* is rather ambitiously styled *El Poder Supremo*—the Supreme Power. It is difficult to imagine the mass of intrigue which surrounds simple transactions in Spanish America : and it is for this reason that the Mosquito Coast remains very largely a closed book to scientists. Governments change in Central America with such musical-comedy rapidity that the slow process of treaty-making and the expensive business of befriending Cabinet Ministers is often brought to nought just before a start into Mosquitia is to be made, and the whole farce must be replayed. The Nicaraguan frontier, too, makes exploration difficult, for it is not geographically fixed with any accuracy. Many years ago the eternal dispute over the Nicaragua-Honduras frontier was put before the King of Spain for arbitration : but his decision, which was delivered in 1906, according to the Nicaraguans seemed to favour Honduras, and was promptly declared null and void. It is generally assumed to run along the course of the River Coco : but since the course of that river is uncharted this does not really help, and any excursion into the Mosquito Coast is regarded with the greatest suspicion, both by the authorities of Honduras and by the gangs of smugglers, gun-runners, and bandits who live on the edges of civilization in the Patuca country. For all these reasons there is a mass of detail and red tape to be seen to in Tegucigalpa : and for this reason

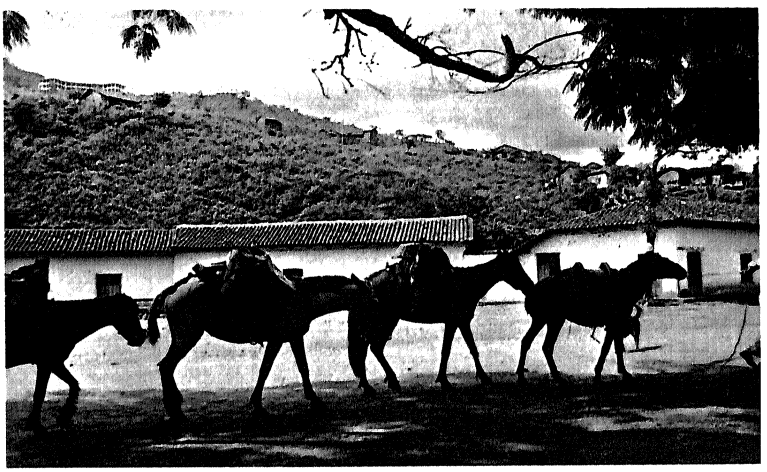
it was that my cousin Nigel and I became acquainted with The Road.

The Road winds endlessly on for nearly three days in the *baronesa*, three days of a fiendish rolling progress on solid wheels. It is intolerably hot, and the fumes of the boiling engine make us both feel ill. The drivers laugh and shriek words of encouragement to us from their seat in front. They seem to enjoy the journey immensely, and considerable discussion frequently arises as to who is the driver. The official driver is Pablo, who is seventeen and is an Indian ; but his colleague, who has no official capacity in the equipage, is much larger and is a very black Negro. Occasionally Pablo sings, and the Negro falls asleep. Nigel and I try to sleep, but it is quite impossible.

From time to time The Road offers diversions. The seven rivers are swollen, for we arrive at the end of the rainy season. During the rains not even the *baronesa* can pass : we later discover that one reason for Pablo's great interest in the journey is that it is the first since the end of the rainy season, and no one has yet been able to discover whether The Road is passable.

When we come to the rivers we stop, while Pablo and his friend do things to the engine to protect it from the water. A large iron pipe projects vertically in the air for about five feet above our heads, so presumably the *baronesa* would still be in working order if all her inmates were drowned. Pablo swathes the spark-plug leads in oily waste. Both drivers point out that we are about to ford a river, and make signs with their hands to show





TEGUCIGALPA: The Road

us exactly what they are doing to the engine. We nod and laugh. The Negro blows the horn to show that even that still works. . . . If the river is not too deep, the *baronesa* wallows through in a dignified way, slowly but without any great difficulty. Sometimes she stops in mid-stream and has to be restarted, which takes a very long time indeed : and crossing the Chamelecón river she did this three times, finally relapsing into a sulky silence. No one says anything : there is no noise but the slap of the thick yellow water against the *baronesa's* buttocks. The swollen river swirls around her and washes away the red mud from under the wheels, so she sinks deeper and deeper into the river-bed. Nigel and I rouse ourselves and look about : apparently we are marooned, fast in mid-stream, and neither of our drivers seem at all concerned about our plight. Pablo grins and shrugs his shoulders with the resignation that is so typical of all Central Americans. '*Hay que esperar !*' There is nothing for it, he says, but to wait. He seems not at all ill-pleased. Perhaps, he says, a *paisano* will happen to come by with a team of *bestia* to haul us out : perhaps, however, he impresses us with some glee, we shall have to remain for several days in mid-stream. This is more than our co-driver can stand : he collapses in fits of laughter and shrieks at us in several dialects. Nigel and I look at each other. This is too much.

'*Carajo, Pablo, tenemos que sacarle de aqui ! No quiero quedar la noche en el agua, coño !*' Nigel's Spanish is more rude than it is accurate : but it seems to impress Pablo, who agrees violently. We tell him that we must reach

Siguatapeque by nightfall, as we have no mosquito-nets and do not relish having to sleep in the open on the plains. Pablo and the Negro have a hurried and heated conference in undertones. Finally, both take off their clothes and wade around towards the front of the *baronesa*, while Nigel stands up with his Winchester to watch for alligators. It is unlikely that any would attack the men in the water in the middle of the day and with the river in full spate, but Pablo seems apprehensive and keeps muttering in undertones about *legartos* ! We see no trace of anything resembling an alligator. After some time Pablo clambers back into the driver's seat, and for some reason which is beyond our mechanical knowledge the engine starts immediately. The wheels spin hopelessly, however, and the *baronesa* does no more than shift her ponderous bulk from one side to the other. The mud is stirred up by our wheels, and the river looks almost black. Finally Nigel and I undress, jump into the mud, and lend our efforts to those of Pablo and the Negro in working her out of the slime. After two hours she moves, slides, sputters, and finally drags herself out of the water. Everything is filthy : our kit is soaked, except for the things which we had wisely packed in water-proof bags, and we are covered in red ooze. The floor of the *baronesa* is several inches deep in it, and it does not look as if we shall ever be a normal colour again.

But the Chamelecón was the worst of the rivers. It is the deepest and most treacherous of them, for it runs at nearly seven miles an hour when the tributaries that pour into it from the hills are really swollen, and some-

times it carries large logs and branches along in its muddy swirl, quite large enough to stave in the side of the *baronesa* or to knock one down if one was wading across the river. Sometimes the Chamelecón is obstructed by several wagons and carts, stuck fast in midstream : and if they are not removed quickly they break up like ships on the rocks, and are carried off to the sea. No one who travels along The Road regularly, (and there are several such people, most of whom claim to be carrying government dispatches of the utmost secrecy and importance) expects to pass straight over the Chamelecón : a delay of a day or so is not regarded as any misfortune. Most travellers prefer, if possible, to make the journey by mule, but at certain times of the year this is out of the question since the water is too deep for the mules to wade across, and swimming they could never hope to carry their enormous burdens over to the other side. This was the chief reason Nigel and I did not travel with a mule train, which we had originally contemplated, and which I think would have been much more fun. Some of our equipment was very heavy, and a mule train would have been impossible except under the most favourable conditions.

In Honduras The Road is regarded as a very busy thoroughfare, and when we talked, during our stay on the coast, of reaching Tegucigalpa by *baronesa* we were assured that no harm could befall travellers on The Road since there was so much *trafico* moving on it at all times. We conjured up pictures of the Great North

Road, of Watling Street and Broadway : no dangers could lurk, from bandits or other incalculable elements, on a road where one was continually in sight of other people. During the two and threequarter days in which we laboured sluggishly along The Road we passed two people, both riding mules. The first was a Very Important Person indeed, handsomely turned out in a pair of khaki breeches and top-boots : at first sight he belonged to the category, mentioned above, of People Carrying Important Documents. He greeted our approach with the gravest suspicion, and pulled well away from our path, with a slight sideways twist of his body to bring the thirty-eight strapped to his side in a shoulder holster into full view. Nigel and I greeted him with the usual '*Adios.*' He paid no attention to us but addressed himself to Pablo, who sat staring woodenly from his seat, '*Ónde van los gringos?*' Where are the foreigners going? There is only one place to which The Road leads, and he must have known it as well as we did, but the question did not surprise Pablo, who shouted '*Vamos a Tegucigalpa*' ; apparently this made the whole business very satisfactory. The stranger grinned, seized the bottle of local beer that Nigel held up to him, and shook us both warmly by the hand. His name, he told us, was José López Calixto, and if we happened to need any insurance he was the man to come to. Before we parted he had offered to sell us a motor-car, to inscribe us on the list of the republican party, to accompany us to the Mosquito Coast, and to take us to a place where he knew, for a dead certainty, that there was an immense

gold mine. We declined all his offers with determination.

The second stranger was later to play a large part in our expedition. He was an imposing figure like the first, but he was tremendously fat and rode his mule with that air of dignity which in Central America is only assumed by those closely connected with the current Government. He wore a broad-brimmed Spanish hat with a flat crown, a grey waistcoat and the tightest of black alpaca trousers which only abandoned the contours of his portly form at the knee, where they flared out into a prodigious width. He seemed to be in a great hurry, and from the front we could see that as he rode towards us his short little legs were banging in and out continuously to encourage the mule to further feats of endurance. Encourage is perhaps not the right word, for each of his spurs was fitted with a sharply spiked wheel, at least an inch in diameter ; but Central American mules seem to care very little for punishment of any kind, and the only way to set them in motion at all is to persevere with the sharpest spurs available. He reined up beside the *baronesa* in Wild-West style, mopping his brow with an enormous red handkerchief. Pablo stopped by pushing the gear lever through into reverse with a horrible crash. The stranger dismounted and introduced himself excitedly and proudly as the *Comandante* of the district of Portrerillos, through which we were now travelling. He was on a commission, he said, a very special commission from the *Poder Supremo* in Tegucigalpa to apprehend a *muy mal hombre* called José López Calixto, who was reputed to have escaped

from the capital not long before, and had we seen anything of a tall man riding a grey mule and wearing a revolver in a shoulder holster? We told him that the grey mule had passed, going well, some six hours before. He sighed contentedly. That was a good thing, he said, for it meant that Calixto was well out of his district by now, and he could not be blamed for letting such a well-known bandit escape. He turned and rode with us towards Siguatapeque, and as we went along he told us the story of José López Calixto and why he was wanted so badly in Tegucigalpa.

Calixto was a Nicaraguan. Nobody in Honduras seemed to know very much about him, how he lived or why he chose to stay away from his own country. There are too many Central Americans who cannot live in their own states for that to have been a matter of importance or even of interest. For the last six months (said our *Comandante*), José López Calixto had lived in Tegucigalpa at the *Estanco de los dos Hermanos*, a low hotel which was the *rendez-vous* for a great many different kinds of undesirables (We later saw how true this was: to stay at the *Dos Hermanos* was to stamp oneself at once as a doubtful character.) At least two Honduran revolutions are known to have started there, and several neighbouring disturbances are suspected of having the *Dos Hermanos* for their origin: and it is suspected that most of the arms trade in the Five Republics is conducted from there. Calixto in spite of this seemed to have been well received in the *haute monde* of Tegucigalpa on account of his good manners and his amazing succession of impeccable clothes. He became in time

SIGUATAPEQUE

MAIN

very friendly with some of the Cabinet Ministers, and was frequently invited to attend the interminable balls which are given by the Honduran Government. He seemed well off and he became particularly friendly with a Cabinet member whom we will call Carlos San Vicente. This friendship continued for some time, until suddenly Calixto disappeared from the *Dos Hermanos* and Carlos San Vicente did not appear to take his seat on the benches. Visitors to the San Vicente house were told that Carlos was ill, that he had a bad headache and could not appear in public. Other more privileged visitors, however, found him sitting in his bedroom gnashing his teeth and tearing his hair, having broken most of the furniture in the room to pieces. . . .

Since then, sighed the *Comandante*, he had heard nothing; he was very anxious to hear what had happened, but had found it quite impossible to get any kind of news from Tegucigalpa at all. All he knew was that an order had come through from the General himself telling him to get Calixto at any price.

It was not till nearly six months later that we knew what had happened.

José López Calixto had approached Carlos San Vicente with a proposal which was to have been very profitable for both of them. He had, he said, been unfairly compelled to leave his native land under a cloud which was connected with some trifling detail about the validity of some American currency he had been distributing in Nicaragua; but fortunately he had been able to escape with his own personal fortune, which he had converted into hundred-dollar bills and

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smuggled out of the country when he made his escape. The trouble was, however, that he was now unable to get rid of even his own valid money because he could get no change : all the Central American banks, which are controlled by Englishmen and North Americans, had received warnings about him from their head offices, and he did not dare go into a bank to change his large notes. As it happened, by a lucky chance he had the hundred-dollar notes with him, and would be quite willing to sell them to his friend Carlos San Vicente at a great discount . . . he had just twelve thousand dollars, and because of his friendship with Carlos, he would part with them for a nominal five thousand dollars. Now American currency in the Spanish republics is the best money that can be had ; as British sterling is to the East, so is the dollar to the Central American countries. It is stable, it is valid everywhere, and it is supremely oblivious of the fluctuations brought about in local currencies by revolutions. Carlos San Vicente was more than interested ; he scraped up five thousand good dollars and handed them over to Calixto. Calixto produced twelve sealed sardine tins and handed them to San Vicente with a crafty smile . . . that was the way, he said, he had managed to keep such an enormous sum safe during his adventures in escaping from Nicaragua. He picked one tin out at random and opened it ; it contained ten one-hundred-dollar notes, crisp and fresh from the United States treasury. Carlos San Vicente, who had until now been just the slightest bit suspicious of his friend, examined the notes closely ; he knew enough

to tell a real note from a forgery, and these were obviously quite genuine. They shook hands on the deal and José López Calixto went home to his hotel, and was heard of no more in Tegucigalpa. It was not until the next day that Carlos San Vicente found that the other eleven tins contained just what one would expect in sardine tins. He had paid five thousand dollars for one thousand dollars, and it later turned out that even the ten one-hundred-dollar notes were not quite good enough. . . .

We never heard what happened to Calixto. He probably escaped, because he was clever ; and I think we rather hoped that he did.

Chapter Two

TEGUCIGALPA

THERE is a tradition among the writers of books on travel in foreign countries which decrees that the reader shall be put in possession of all the facts about the journey. Knowledgeable readers must be allowed to have their opinions about one's dietetics and equipment, and old gentlemen must have their say about what should have been done, or about young people nowadays not understanding the Value of Good Staff Work at The Base. Readers all over the world (one hopes), safe in their arm-chairs, must be allowed to criticize and calculate exactly why the misfortunes they recognize as adventures took place: and it is cheating, just as in a murder story it is cheating for the detective to find clues which the reader knows nothing about, to start a journey in the middle of unexplored deserts or to open a book under fire in some South American Revolution. It is intolerable for the author of a thriller to introduce a Supernatural Power or an Unknown Eastern Drug into his deductive nexus at the last moment, and it is just as bad for the travel-writer to move a thousand miles between chapters, or to escape from the melting icefloe by some means which the reader is left to imagine. The reader has a certain and immediate escape from the monotony of tropical

jungles and the tedium of frozen steppes ; he need only do his travelling in small comfortable doses. And he must bear with the author during the dull empty parts of his voyaging.

Our journey from the coast to Tegucigalpa was more amusing than it was exciting or interesting. There was little to see, beyond the wild rugged landscapes, and the incredible jolting of the *baronesa* did not tend to put us in any mood to appreciate scenery. I think that during those sixty hours I was more uncomfortable than I have ever been before : but the journey served to give us a slight idea of the details of organization which lay before us. Nothing could in fact be simpler than travelling from the Caribbean to the Capital, but encumbered with the lackadaisical vacillations of the Spanish *mozo* the journey became a vast and improbable gamble. There was a time on the coast when we had almost abandoned hope of starting inland : everything seemed against us and we had not yet learned that in tropical America one must see to every tiny detail oneself. Our agents in Puerto Cortéz, highly recommended locally, had drawn their pay and apparently retired. Porters had failed to appear, our gear was damply entombed for dreary days in the Customs House, and much of it went astray altogether. We were told that the road was impassable and that the *baronesa* had broken down beyond repair, that we were not to be allowed, after all, *to start*. . . .

I repeat that in Honduras one must watch everything done personally or else do it oneself. Perhaps the admixture of Indian and Negro blood (the Hon-

durans are nearly all of mixed blood) aggravates the proverbial laziness of the Spaniard ; perhaps it is just the natural drowsy effect of the tropics.

Certainly there are more contentedly unemployed people in Honduras than anywhere else. The country is rich, and the population small, so there is little incentive to work ; food can be had from the trees and the ground, and the red native beans which form the backbone of the native diet are almost given for the asking. The climate is so hot that a quantity of clothes is nothing to work for. The only temptation that leads the lower-class Honduran to work is the possibility of eventually earning enough money to buy a revolver, which is the final ambition of them all : with a revolver money is easy enough to get hold of, and no nonsense about working for it : and in addition the *peon* with a gun rises immensely in local society as if his armed estate gave him a civil status beyond the reach of the unarmed pauper.

The chief piece of unpleasantness we encountered was in the Customs, and was due to the local love of firearms, which is not confined entirely to the *peones*. We had an enormous armoury . . . repeating shotguns, rifles, revolvers, automatics . . . every conceivable form of weapon which we felt might be useful or which thoughtful but ill-informed friends before our departure had considered suitable. The official in charge of the *aduana* peered at them in envious consternation, but there was nothing he could do . . . we had permits, bunches of them, signed by the highest authorities in Tegucigalpa. They were an impressive

display, stamped and counter-stamped, sealed and counter-sealed, and signed, apparently at random, by the Minister of War, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Finance, and for good measure by a mysterious official known as the Minister of Fomento, whose function we were never able to discover. In the face of this evidence of our *bona fides* the local officer could not read a revolution into our expedition, or suspect us of gun-running : but he resignedly contented himself with checking and re-checking every number, bore, and quantity of ammunition. The process took well over two hours. Finally he fell upon Nigel's repeating twenty-two, which seemed to tempt him too far ; it was called a *rifle* on the permit and the invoice, he wheedled, but nothing was said about it being a *repeater* : did we think we could smuggle dangerous weapons into Honduras as easily as that ? For all he knew, the permits might be forgeries anyway, and we might be the advance guard of an invading army ! He carried the twenty-two lovingly away and returned us the rest, telling us severely that Further Investigations would have to be made and the permits verified, and the whole affair carefully taken up with the *Poder Supremo* at Tegucigalpa.

We were ignorant then : we did not know enough to do what we should have done. In our simple way we imagined that telegrams would be sent at once to the Capital, instructions and apologies would then issue, and the rifle would be returned to us by special messenger. We told each other how much trouble the Customs man would get into for confiscating it, and we

said it served him right : we wondered whether he would lose his job or merely be reduced in rank.

An uneventful week passed without news from the *aduana*, while we went on with other arrangements for the journey.

Just before we started inland we mentioned the matter to the *Comandante* of Puerto Cortéz, who had received special instructions from the President to look after us. He was furious : he flew into a tremendous rage and dragged us off immediately to the Customs House, where he demanded in an extravaganza of rhetoric that our property be handed over to us, ' in the name of General Carías, President of the Republic.' Now if there is one thing that puts the fear of God into an official in Honduras it is the mention of General Carías, and we were to find, on many occasions, that this was a magic breeze to carry us through the doldrums of official formality. General Carías is enormous and leonine, a terrifying figure who seized the Presidency some years ago by sheer bravery and strength of character. *El General* to the people of the coast towns, and in particular to the petty officials, is an almost legendary figure. His word is supreme ; he is the Government, and has many ways of getting what he wants.

The *aduanero*, who had been nastily startled by the entrance of the *Comandante*, was very frightened by this invocation of *El General*. He scurried around and made a great show of looking for the rifle in all the most improbable places in the Customs House. It was obviously not there : we knew it, he knew it, and he knew

that we knew it. He fidgeted uncomfortably and licked his lips. Suddenly it dawned on him: '*Hombre!*' Of course, how could he have forgotten! He had just taken it round to his own house for a day or so, to clean it, as he was afraid it would get rusty lying in the Customs House. . . .

There is something about the town of Tegucigalpa which makes it seem infinitely removed from the sane and orderly world to which one is accustomed. There is something in the loneliness of its mountain surroundings, which cut it off from outside influences, that makes it appear a little unreal. Everything about Tegucigalpa is a mixture; the people are a wild hotchpotch of colours and races, the climate is half mountainous and half tropical, and it is altogether a queer compromise between the lawlessness of the wilds and the civilization of a rising republic. It is a place of vivid contrasts between the savage and the civilized, which make the little peculiarities of a backward community stand out in grotesque relief. One is given the impression that Tegucigalpa was, not long ago, a native village, and that upon it was suddenly crammed all the bustling veneer of American modernity. Such a contrast is common enough in tropical countries; for there are very few parts of the earth which have not been reached by the enterprising representatives of American business houses, which amass enormous fortunes by peddling the most modern products to the most backward people. But in Honduras there is something lacking which makes the contrast stronger. The

country is hard to reach, and its foreign contacts are few ; the civilization which has come so suddenly to Honduras develops rapidly, in its own way, and it has not the advantage of having other countries in close touch with it to modulate the flow of its progress.

Tegucigalpa can lay very few claims to beauty. There is a certain grandeur in its wild mountain setting, but without that background the town itself is for the most part unexciting. The architecture is Spanish, showing the strong influence which is the legacy of the *Conquistadores*, but the charm of low roofs and patios is rather offset by the fact that the streets are laid out in the modern American fashion, dully rectilinear. The town is divided into two by a small and dirty river, in which most of the local washing is done, which separates suburban Comayaguela from Tegucigalpa. There are a few landmarks which stand out in one's memory, whether one arrives by land or by air ; the Cathedral, an enormous but little patronized edifice of mixed and rather *rococo* architecture, with its great Spanish tower standing high over the town ; the President's palace, a dazzling white square with concrete battlements and machine-guns standing ready to scatter lead in the interests of *El Poder Supremo*, and the twin forts which stand one on either side of the Capital. The forts are the first objective of revolutionaries who are making an assault on Tegucigalpa, for they stand on two high hills in positions that command every corner of the town. It sometimes happens, if a badly organized revolution gets out of hand, that the parties are in possession of a fort each, and take turns shooting with antiquated

TEGUCIGALPA: The Palace of 'El Poder Supremo

cannon in the general direction of the town. Most of the Legations of the foreign powers are in a direct line between the two. His Majesty's Legation, with justifiable caution, has recently moved itself to a high hill some way out of the town, whence it can watch the fun in safety.

The Hondurans are a very remarkable nation in that they can always be relied on to live up to their reputation, and frequently to go one better. The general conduct of civil and military affairs in Central America is surprisingly similar to the common idea. The Honduran has a reputation for revolutions, and he sees to it that a year rarely passes without one. He is thought of as wearing a wide-brimmed sombrero, and will very rarely be seen without it. The Honduran Army is largely composed of officers of Field Rank, and the General Staff has (at least until recently) been inclined to take into consideration, when planning the activities of the soldiery, a great many factors other than military efficiency. The Government is characteristically lackadaisical, and there is only One Sure Way of getting anything accomplished. Any friendly advances that one makes to those in authority are as likely as not wasted, as a new government may come into office in the following week, and all the important positions will be redistributed, with brilliant partiality, to the friends and relations of the President. There is no dishonesty in Honduras, but affairs are conducted on a different basis from our own ; everyone, or nearly everyone, accepts an original moral point of view, and the local scale of honesty is calibrated accordingly.

Honduras was, certainly until 1924, probably the most actively and consistently turbulent country in either hemisphere. Revolution was literally a normal condition ; and it was axiomatic that all revolutions were successful. The country was very sparsely populated and there was in it no kind of unity. Several languages were spoken, and there were only the most rudimentary communications. The success of insurgents was partly due to this, for nothing was ever heard of a revolution in the Capital until the Government was on the point of falling, and enthusiastic revolutionaries in outlying provinces would sometimes be several revolutions behind in their activities, through not having heard the result of their own previous efforts.

Another aggravation to the unsettled state of the country was the presence of large quantities of adventurous foreigners, some of whom were taking refuge from the law in Honduras and some of whom were merely voluntary amateur revolutionaries. The seaports on the Caribbean coast were filled with Englishmen, Irishmen and Americans who were out to amuse themselves and make whatever profit they could from the country. Just before and for a considerable number of years after the Great War, Puerto Cortéz, Tela and La Ceiba were filled with some of the toughest and roughest characters of the world.

The best known of all the ' filibusters,' and the one who played the greatest part in changing the history of the five republics, was a certain ' General ' Lee Christmas, a stupid and pig-headed adventurer with tremen-

dous charm and courage and a blustering personality that attracted the simple soldiery of Honduras. Revolutions in Honduras are fought without very much personal animosity and with little loyalty; soldiers frequently change sides and always rally around the standard that looks as if it is most likely to win. *El General Chreestmass*, as he became known, was a terrifying figure who dominated the politics of Honduras for three decades, leading the army into battle and continually designing for himself new and more gorgeous uniforms. His career started abruptly and accidentally. He was originally an American railway engineer who had been dismissed from his job at home and had no prospect of getting another. In time he found his way to New Orleans, which is the main gateway to Central America, and almost in despair he boarded a ship which was sailing for Tela. The story goes that he did not know where the ship was going, and that when the purser asked for his ticket he paid his fare with what little money he had left to 'Whatever place we get to first.' Eighteen months later, having landed in Honduras, Christmas was *Generalissimo* of the Army and practically dictator of the country. He had installed General Bonilla in the Presidency, but it was obvious that he himself was the only figure of importance and that he had the loyalty of the country behind him. He had taken the seaports on the Caribbean coast, and he had made and spent three considerable fortunes.

Lee Christmas made his début in the revolutionary circles of Honduras in 1910, when a train-load of

bananas which he was driving along the Caribbean coast was attacked by insurgents, who ordered him to drive on as fast as the engine would travel towards Puerto Cortéz. Christmas, sensibly enough, did not offer any resistance, and presently began to enjoy the feeling of defying authority as his train rushed along the shore with bullets whistling past his ears. Before long it became apparent that the little band of revolutionaries in the train were in for a bad time, as their ammunition was running low and the enemy seemed to be present in larger numbers than had been expected. Christmas, although uneducated and as obstinate as one can well be, was at least a man of resource and quick decisions. He took command, somehow (without a word of Spanish) of the revolutionary train and ran it into a siding near Puerto Cortéz, where he loaded it with disused boilers and plates of steel. With the help of his soldiers the train was converted into a rolling fort and machine-guns were fitted inside the boilers to cover the country on both sides of the track as the train went along.

When his preparations were completed, he put the engine into reverse and backed the train down the single track towards the Government troops, which were conveniently engaged in pitching camp beside the line.

The Government soldiers did not take long to make up their minds. They were so impressed with this mechanical *tour de force* that they deserted (including most of the officers) and rallied around the standard of the new *jefe* . . . *el jefe Chreestmass* as he was

TEGUCIGALPA: Loteria Nacidnal

TEGUCIGALPA: La Merced

known from then on. That night he was made a Colonel.

The next day the revolutionaries, who had until the arrival of Lee Christmas been fighting in a very half-hearted and disorganized manner, seized all the coastal towns with the Customs houses and their enormous revenue. Christmas had the sense to see that this gave him a stranglehold over the country ; for almost all the money in Honduras comes from taxes and duties on the ports. By the time he had conquered the coast his victory was really complete, for his reputation was growing in an extraordinary way, and he was already an almost legendary figure in the simple minds of the *peones*. His courage was tremendous, and stories are still told of *jefe Chreestmass* taking machine-guns single-handed, charging whole platoons of soldiers, and escaping from impossible situations. At one time he was, as a matter of fact, captured by the Government troops and sentenced to be shot, but his bravery and cool nerve saved his life. The officer in charge of the execution, something of a sentimentalist, let him go because he appeared to care so little for the preparations of the firing squad. Christmas never learned Spanish, but by this time he had picked up most of the swear-words, and these he hurled in quick succession at the enemy officers who had come to watch the *jefe gringo* die. The Honduran admires bravery more than anything else, and it was somehow arranged that he should escape, taking several of the Government officers with him to join the insurgent army.

For many years the adventurer Christmas held the

position in Honduras that Pancho Villa had held, many years before, in Mexico. He was a legalized bandit, useful to the Government but dangerous, tolerated only because he might be useful in the future. While the revolution was in progress, Lee Christmas was invaluable, and in fact was responsible for the victory of the rebels : but once Bonilla was President, earnestly trying to bring peace and civilization to the country, Christmas became a great nuisance rather than a help. He held various official positions in Tegucigalpa and insisted on creating the most elaborate and gorgeous uniforms to go with them. Officially he was not a success, for his methods were frequently too direct and rarely constitutional. As the country became quieter and less turbulent, Christmas became the most disturbing element in it ; no one dared cross him, no one dared get rid of him ; and someone always had to smooth over the little ' situations ' which he caused with great regularity. He was the revolutionary *enfant terrible*.

The history of Lee Christmas is a wild and melodramatic saga which would occupy several volumes if it were told in full. He soon fell in with the tradition of tropical intrigue, and there were times when he was fighting on both sides of the fence. He married five wives in as many years, had innumerable children, and killed those who crossed his path without even momentary hesitation. He finally died, not from a bullet or *machete* wound, but from some very obscure tropical disease. During his numerous campaigns he was on several occasions reported in the Press as dead, and

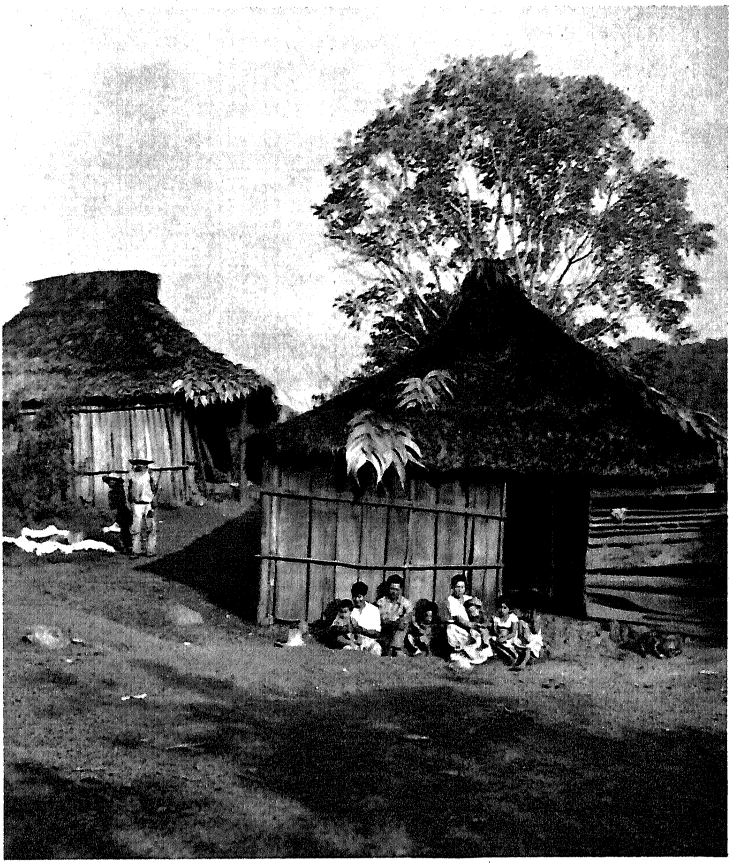
this he always regarded, for some reason, as a great personal insult ; in fact he tried to sue newspaper owners on more than one occasion for what he considered a wicked libel.

A number of other figures stand out in the revolution-ridden history of Honduras, most of them still living : Guy Moloney, for instance, an enormous Irishman, who was at one time Chief of Police in New Orleans and is one of the world's best machine-gunners. He was Christmas's lieutenant for a great many years, and between them they were a combination that made any fighting in Honduras pretty decisive. Moloney still lives in the country, where he is an active and influential figure in the local politics of San Pedro Sula. There was also a certain General Jefferies, and another Irishman by name of O'Reilly, who all played important and exciting parts in the development of the new Republic, but they are still living and their story is by no means at an end.

It must by now appear to the reader that I am well away from my original subject, which was an expedition made by my cousin and myself into the unexplored territory on the Honduran Mosquito Coast. I think, however, that I am right in bringing in some of the other aspects of Honduras, which will help the reader who does not know the country to understand some of the snags which lay in our path. By far the most difficult part of our expedition was getting started at all from Tegucigalpa, whose official and unofficial circles seemed anxious, for some time, that we should be discouraged from an assault on the Mosquito Coast.

No one could have been more helpful than the Honduran Government ; but there was always the impression, lingering in spite of innumerable courtesies, that we were not regarded with official favour. As I have said before, the Mosquito Coast is the special preserve of the President, and one is not encouraged to go there unless one can give evidence of very serious and straightforward business. The idea of people going there for fun was almost too much. Scientists, who are known to be mad, are understood, as are prospectors ; but it was inconceivable that we should be going there without some ulterior motives. Luckily we had arranged for proof of our *bona fides* to be given officially, through introductions we happened to have.

For nearly three weeks we stayed in Tegucigalpa, not really because we had to but because we liked it. We played everlasting games of golf with the Diplomatic Corps, who to the great annoyance of pilots have built a golf course, with numerous bunkers, across the middle of the Government aerodrome at Toncontin. We went to enormous dances, lasting usually till morning, given by the Government at the International Club, with pine-needles strewn over the stairs and on the floor in all the ante-rooms, and relays of Marimba bands beating out modern dance tunes with a solid Indian rhythm and an occasional lapse into a Spanish tempo. Sweet champagne is served, and enormous rounds of brandy. There is very little noise ; the Hondurans are quiet and dance, too, with a solid Indian determination. We sit at the bar most of the time and talk about local politics.



NEAR COMAYAGUELA

The Marimba is a surprising instrument which is played by any number of musicians, ranging usually from half a dozen to a dozen, who all play on different parts of it, apparently with little regard for each other. The Marimba looks like the instrument we should call a xylophone, but it is infinitely more noisy and has probably rather less finesse in its music, which sounds much better at a considerable distance. The more modern and expensive Marimba bands in Tegucigalpa are further supplemented and supported by people playing saxophones and trumpets of various kinds, who sit around the Marimba and improvize accompaniments and embellishments to the original tune. Nearly all the music played by the Marimba is the ordinary dance music which one hears in every country of the world to-day ; but it seems, in Tegucigalpa, to derive a sort of sinister and slightly grotesque eastern lilt through the liberties which are taken with time and key. The Hondurans are not musical, and have no form of native music, even among the Indian tribes ; in fact, they are not in any way artistic, as are their neighbours the Guatemalans and Nicaraguans.

They were pleasant days. We planned our campaign with all the old soldiers of the country, and gradually the expedition took shape. We saw the President, old General Carías who had terrified the Customs men at Puerto Cortéz ; we dined in the Legations and we rode mules up to the great silver mines at San Juancito, where there are over a hundred miles of underground tunnels in the mountain-face. We

stayed at *fincas* in the country near Tegucigalpa and heard all the most confidential secrets of Central American diplomacy. We rested and talked and improved our Spanish. We did not want to leave.

Chapter Three

PERLA DEL MAR

THERE are two reasonable ways and one slightly fantastic way of penetrating to the interior of the Mosquitia territory. The most obvious route, which we eventually adopted after several weeks of wrangling, was through Brewer's Lagoon and up the Patuca river; the other, slightly slower but perhaps more sensible, would have been to go across country from Tegucigalpa by mule and to attack the unexplored area from the east instead of from the Caribbean coast. The third method, which we should dearly have liked to try, but which we hardly dared to mention, was to take an aeroplane from Tegucigalpa and chance being able to land on one of the broad sand-banks which we had heard lay along the Patuca. It was a fairly big risk, however, for the water was high at that time of year and had we not managed to put the 'plane down almost immediately we might not have been able to get back. Another thing which deterred us from this plan was the fact that the only 'plane available was an old tri-motor, heavy and unwieldy; and being fairly large it needed a considerable run in which to land. Neither Nigel nor I had very much experience in flying large 'planes.

The cross-country method might have been very

practical for our purpose, but again might have been useless : no one knew anything of the country between Tegucigalpa and Mosquitia beyond the limits of the villages. The going might have been very bad, and we should perhaps have taken many weeks to cut or burn a way through the bush. A track leads from the Capital as far as Catacamas, but beyond that there is no trail, and we should probably have been badly lost if we tried to make any kind of journey in the unmapped area. Travelling across country through tropical vegetation is very slow and boring and I think would have been less satisfactory, on the whole, than the route we chose in the end.

The Province of La Mosquitia is the area which is bounded on the north by the Caribbean, on the south by the Province of Olancho and the river Segovia or Coco, and on the west by the Province of Colón. It is mixed country ; the thickest kind of tropical jungle alternates with miles of savanna, and apart from the streams and rivers there are no landmarks of any kind.

Most of Mosquitia is unmapped, and it contains some of the largest tracts of unexplored land which remain. Here and there a river has been sketched in on the word of a wandering prospector, and the fringes of the province are comparatively well known, but for the most part it remains interestingly white on the map. Very few expeditions have ever tried to penetrate the interior.

The last official expedition into Mosquitia was under the auspices of the Honduran Government, and took

place no later than 1882. It was a tremendous affair, supported by soldiers, engineers and scientists, who started off up the Patuca river almost two hundred strong. The size of the party was its undoing, however, for the Nicaraguan frontier guards were suspicious at the news that such a large force was in their neighbourhood, and nothing was accomplished beyond an ignominious and undignified skirmish with semi-official Nicaraguan bandit troops. Since that time the Honduran Government has made no effort to open up Mosquitia, partly because the government is usually so temporary that it does not care to embark on any project that is not immediately profitable, and partly because the population of Honduras is still far too small to expand successfully into new ground. The result is that the condition of the Mosquito Coast is much the same to-day as it was in 1882, when Queen Victoria gave it away. As far as the Honduran Government is concerned it is probably a great nuisance, for it is obviously impossible to police, and all the bandits of Central America take refuge there at one time or another. That is one of the reasons why one is not allowed to go there without some plausible excuse, and explains the lack of available scientific data.

In Honduras Mosquitia is regarded as infinitely remote, and there must be many Hondurans who do not realize that it is part of their country. They know that away to the east, towards Nicaragua, there is wild country ; but there seems to be little interest in anything that goes on outside Tegucigalpa. Civilization has not yet lost its novelty, and it will be many years

before the Honduran turns away from the towns for his amusement. Whenever mention was made of our expedition to Mosquitia a polite silence followed, and people looked at us in suspicious surprise. There were two views commonly held ; that we were engaged in some dastardly business, with or without the consent of the Government, or that we were simply mad, perhaps the more charitable view. Certainly the Mosquito Coast has a far worse reputation in Honduras than it deserves.

Our project sounded very simple as we sat in the cool patio of the Legation in Tegucigalpa. Nothing could be easier ; we would fly down to the coast, where we would then find it easy enough to hire a schooner to take us eastward as far as Brewer's Lagoon. From there we would proceed by boat up the Tom-Tom Cut-off, which connects the Lagoon with the Patuca. At the junction of the Cut-off and the Patuca we would make our first base camp, hire porters, arrange provisions, and get under way towards the interior. As we sat lazily sipping our champagne cocktails we could see no possible difficulties ; it seemed too easy for words. Many were the times, during the weeks to come, that we remembered those pleasant quiet days, and thought longingly of the soothing coolness of iced drinks. . . .

We left Tegucigalpa on July the twenty-seventh, in a rather decrepit and overloaded aeroplane which we hoped would take us as far as La Ceiba, a small port on the Caribbean. At La Ceiba one was sure to find a schooner, we were told, for it was the centre of various

enterprises connected with schooners, and the craft from the Bay Islands went continually back and forth.

Most of Tegucigalpa was at Toncontin aerodrome to see us off. The President himself, an enormous black figure closely guarded by a squad of machine-gunners, ventured daringly from the palace to wish us well. A misguided lady whom we had never seen before embarrassingly brought us two huge boxes of chocolates. Someone connected with the military had seen fit that the army band should be on the spot, and it dutifully rendered ' God Save the King ' in a vaguely minor key. We shook hands for a very long time. The engine roared ; we clambered into the 'plane and wallowed, for longer than seemed suitable, across the field. We just managed to clear the line of palm trees that stands annoyingly at the south end of the field. We had started.

As we flew down towards the coast, bumping uncomfortably across the mountains, we could not help a feeling of regret at leaving Tegucigalpa. We had been very happy in that gay remote little Capital, and the thought of the discomforts which we were to tolerate during the next two months made it seem very civilized. We had a vague feeling that in reaching Tegucigalpa we had almost gone far enough afield, without venturing into the jungles and swamps of the Coast. There seemed to be no justification or even excuse for our project ; we were neither of us particularly well prepared for coping with life in the wilds, neither of us had the faintest glimmering of any scientific knowledge, and

the only reason we could give for the journey was that we felt like making it. I know that nobody in Honduras believed that, and I suspect that many explanations are still being whispered around the local clubs in the very confidential manner which is adopted in Central America for discussing even the most commonplace news.

It took well over three hours to reach La Ceiba. As we fell the several thousand feet that separate Tegucigalpa from sea-level it became constantly hotter and the thick clothes we had been wearing in the mountains grew oppressive. There was one other passenger in the 'plane, a very small Negro with a revolver tucked precariously into the top of his trousers. He shrieked at us from time to time and gesticulated towards lakes, rivers and houses. Several of the windows in the 'plane were broken so we heard nothing. We grinned and waved at him.

La Ceiba is the biggest and best of the Caribbean ports in Honduras. It is old, or comparatively so, unlike the other ports which have been uninterestingly erected by enterprising fruit companies. In the history of Honduras La Ceiba has played a considerable part, for it is a rich town, contains a large garrison and is always among the first places to be attacked when a revolution is brewing. There is quite a lot of shipping ; cargo boats loaded down with bananas sail for England and Europe, freighters going to and from the southern ports of the United States call as often as twice a month, and various small tramps and traders are to be seen in

LA CEIBA

the bay. When the hurricanes are not blowing numbers of schooners bustle about, carrying copra and coconuts and pineapples to British Honduras and the West Indian Islands. It was one of these schooners that we hoped would take us along the coast to Brewer's Lagoon.

Should we be unable to go by schooner, either because none could be found willing to take us or on account of the weather, we had another alternative ; to go along the beach as far as the Patuca mouth. This we decided to do only as a last resource, as it would mean a week or more of travel over soft sand, which is slow, hard work. The coast-line makes a long detour between La Ceiba and the Lagoons. To cut straight across country from La Ceiba to the Patuca was out of the question as it entailed crossing many miles of swamps, very treacherous and unhealthy. We were told that on several occasions beachcombers had made their way to Brewer's Lagoon along the beach, but they usually took several weeks about it and were in a position to dispense with the heavy equipment we had to carry. Much of the stuff we took with us was quite useless, but we did not know this until later, and we hoped to take it all with us as far as the Lagoon or even to our first base camp at the lower end of the Tom-Tom Cut-off.

We spent several days in La Ceiba looking for a schooner. There were plenty lying idle in the bay, but no one was to be hurried, and we were regarded with considerable suspicion. The proprietor of the Hotel Alemán had recommended us to seek out a certain Cap-

tain Macdonald, who was owner and master of the schooner *Perla del Mar*. Captain Macdonald was a Bay Islander, descended directly from some of Morgan's pirates who had taken refuge among the Islands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although we put very little faith in advice which came from the hotel proprietor, we thought with nationalistic conceit that Macdonald was obviously our man ; he was white and spoke English, and would be easier and more straightforward to deal with than the Hondurans and Caribs who owned the other schooners we had visited. He was very hard to find, because his boat rarely came to Ceiba and when it did he spent all his time ashore buried in the depths of the *Cantinas* on the waterfront.

It was Nigel who finally discovered that our Captain was in a certain *Cantina Rosa* near the wharf. He came back to the hotel to fetch me, and together we went down to bargain for our passage. Captain Macdonald had a great reputation among the Islanders, and those who misunderstood us used to tell us, cautiously, that the *Perla del Mar* was a very good schooner, ready to undertake any kind of profitable enterprise. . . .

The *Cantina Rosa* was evidently the fashionable resort of the waterfront. It was a small wooden house, built like most of the houses in La Ceiba, supported on trestles over the water. The front room was a general clubroom, and at the time we visited it seemed to contain several factions in a heated political dispute which we did not linger to consider. The atmosphere was chiefly nautical ; numbers of sailors and their womenfolk stood about, with numerous small children of

several colours. Unnoticed by everyone but ourselves wandered a number of hens, two black pigs and a goat.

This did not look the kind of place where a man of Captain Macdonald's stamp would amuse himself. We pushed through to the back room, where the intellectual level was on a less political plane and little was going on beyond honest drinking. It was a long room, a wooden shed fitted with an old-fashioned bar which ran its length along the far wall. Four bare electric bulbs hung crookedly from the ceiling and threw a glaring light on the ten or twelve men who were lined against the bar. At first sight there was nothing to indicate which of them might be Captain Macdonald. No one paid any attention to us. Finally an old Negress, enormously fat—probably Rosa herself—greeted us enthusiastically. '*Conoces al Capitán Macdonald?*' we shrieked above the half-drunken din. Several men looked up and volunteered information in as many languages. The figure nearest to us detached himself from the bar and pointed sombrely to the other end of the room : he was a coal-black Belize Negro. 'Captain Macdonald, sah? Yes, sah, him down dere, dat big feller . . .' We looked along the line of the bar and saw, towering above the rest, an enormous man with a vast red face, wearing a singlet and a dirty blue deep-sea cap. He was drinking Irish whisky from a bottle. As he heard his name mentioned he came towards us, and we could see that he was no more than twenty-four or five years old. He addressed us in perfectly good English, with what sounded like a

slight trace of a Jamaican accent. He slapped us both on the back with a heavy great hand.

'I'm Captain Macdonald, how d'you do? José at the Hotel Alemán told me you might drop in to see me . . . what about a drink? Rosa, set up three whiskies.'

We explained exactly what we wanted to do. He was to take us to Brewer's Lagoon with our equipment and provisions, leave us there, and call for us again some weeks later at a date which we would arrange. He listened carefully and beamed at us. We called for more drinks while we discussed our plans and bargained with the Captain. He agreed to take us, at the same time pointing out that he took no responsibility for our return if we were not at the lagoon when he came back for us. He clearly thought we were mad. We had another drink and he embarked on his life history and *mémoires*, which lasted for some hours while we stoked him with whisky and rum. He had done a number of interesting things, had Captain Macdonald; he had fought in every revolution of note in Central America during the last few years, and had apparently decided the day on each occasion by his own efforts. He had run guns and ammunition, and had always managed to outwit the Government cutters; he had worked in New Orleans for a short time on the staff of a small newspaper; and finally, by hook and by crook, he had gathered enough money to build his schooner, the *Perla del Mar*, which he now used only for the most straightforward and profitable purposes. As far as we could tell, Captain Macdonald might still be talking to this

day, had not an interruption occurred which broke his train of thought.

A certain amount of noise had been going on at the other end of the bar, but to this we had paid very little attention, as we were interested in the Captain's discourse. But as the noise grew louder, it became apparent that some heated point was under discussion. Shortly before the climax of the argument a man seated quietly at a small side-table drew his revolver and shot, with drunken accuracy, at the lights. He gaily smashed three of the four bulbs. In a country where everyone carries a gun, however, shooting is apt to be misunderstood, and trouble started because it was not generally realized that the shooting was entirely in a spirit of celebration. Captain Macdonald was delighted at the sight of a free fight, and amused himself by throwing bottles nonchalantly into the crowd.

When peace was restored the Captain's mind was, fortunately, once more turned to our project of going to Mosquitia, and by midnight we had haggled and bargained till he finally agreed to take us as far as Brewer's for five pounds. One thing, however, he insisted ; we must sail at the crack of dawn on the following morning, because he did not want to miss the tide over the Patuca Bar. He had been caught before on the Bar, with a hurricane blowing up from the south, and if we were not on board by daybreak he would lose all further interest in the expedition.

We escaped his invitation to further revelry by explaining that we had to pack our things if we were to be off by dawn. He went enormously out into the

night and sang his way to the next *Cantina*. We wondered if we should see him again.

The tropical dawn was breaking vividly in a troubled sky when we boarded the *Perla del Mar* the next morning. The crew had not arrived and the wharf was deserted. We jumped into a dory and rowed out to the schooner. She was dirty and reeked of oil—to our surprise we found that she was fitted with a large Diesel engine, which the Captain had not mentioned—and the deck was thick with dead banana leaves. From the hatch came a number of strong mixed smells—copra, and paint, and tar. The light was still dim, so we could not see very much of her. Forward there was a small wheelhouse, and behind it a cabin which was the Captain's ; aft a low deck-house and a hatch, then another hatch and a cockpit. She was extremely broad and we could see that she was very strongly built. There were no other sleeping quarters. If it was fine we slept on deck, but if it blew up badly we should have to go down into the narrow hold where the crew slept. We stowed our things below and sat on the engine-room hatch to wait for the Captain. The *Perla del Mar* rose and fell easily in the morning swell.

It was high daylight before we saw any sign of Macdonald. He finally arrived in a small motor-launch, accompanied by several Government officials in brass-bound uniforms. It looked, from a distance, as if there had been trouble ; perhaps he was to be arrested and the ship confiscated. It was possible from what we had heard of him. As the launch drew alongside, however,

it became apparent that the officials were paying more attention to us than to Captain Macdonald, and by the time they reached the schooner's side there was no doubt about it ; Nigel and I were the object of all their attention. We did not know what to think. The *Comandante* clambered aboard and waited, without speaking, until his colleagues had done the same. They faced us in an important group. We were ready for the worst ; the Government had changed its mind, we were not to be allowed to go . . . obviously we should have to start all over again, and approach the territory from another direction.

The *Comandante* cleared his throat. ' *Vengo,*' he said with dignity, ' *para saludar a Vds., en el nombre del Senor Presidente de la Republica, y para darle su despedida . . .*'

We almost collapsed with relief. The President was wishing us an official *bon voyage,* and we had thought that he would stop us . . . Nigel had a bottle of rum which he had brought from shore the night before, and we celebrated our departure with Captain and officials. The crew, which consisted of five islanders, began to arrive in ones and twos in canoes and dories. The anchor came up noisily; sails appeared, and we took our leave of the *Comandante.*

A gentle breeze carried us slowly out into the bay and the schooner's patched old sails began to fill. We were forced to tack back and forth for nearly an hour in front of the town, as it was at the last minute found that the Chief Engineer was not on board.

He eventually appeared, sleeping soundly, in the bottom of a dinghy which was rowed out to us by two

Carib boys. Nothing would rouse Engineer Carlos from his sleep, and getting him aboard was a great problem. We tried pulling him and lifting him, and we tried soaking him with buckets of water to wake him. Captain Macdonald finally hoisted him aboard on the anchor burton.

The Captain headed her east and as we drew away from land a fine wind caught us, driving the schooner's blunt bows through the vivid blue of the Caribbean. We had started on the second stage of our journey.

Most of the first day on the schooner we lay lazily under a tarpaulin awning on the deck, sleeping and talking and occasionally singing. There was little else to do, and there was always the chance that dirty weather would blow up before nightfall and we should get no sleep later. From time to time the cook turned out meals in the tiny galley that stood, as if built as an afterthought, hanging far out over the schooner's counter. Part of the time we studied maps and talked over our plans, endlessly tracing out the route we meant to take. There are several maps of Mosquitia, all of them different and all of them wrong even as far as they go ; and at this time we did not know which of them came nearest to being accurate. None of them showed more than a bare outline with an occasional river or a ridge of mountains vaguely indicated. Much advice came from Captain Macdonald and Carlos, who had quickly recovered once we were away at sea. Like the people on the mainland they could not decide whether to believe what we said or not, and were continually

torn between trying to show us that they did believe us and letting us see that they were not quite such fools as to believe *that* sort of thing. The Captain always safeguarded his credulous reputation by giving an enormous wink whenever there was any mention of our purpose in going up the Patuca.

The crew worked without orders and with that perfect understanding that comes only from long years together. They had no fixed watches, and like fishermen, seemed to be a democratic body communally in command of the boat. Captain Macdonald was the owner, but all profits were shared among the six of them, and his Captaincy was only obvious when we approached land and he took the wheel.

Nothing happened during that long day at sea. We made our way east with slow determination, most of the time just out of sight of land. Occasionally the top of a mountain was visible, and to the north were the low white lines that marked the great reefs of the Bay Islands. Carlos kept the Diesel running all day, for there was hardly enough wind to fill our sails. We lay on our backs and stared into the vast blue of the sky. From the forward hatch came the strains of a guitar, and a deep voice sang :

‘ *Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay,—*
Canta y no llores,
Porque en cantando se allegren,
Cielito lindo,
Los corazones . . .

De la sierra morena,
Vienen bajando,
Cielito lindo,
Los Corazones,
aúnque estamos solo
Cielito Lindo,
Dame un abrazo . . .
Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay—'

In the late afternoon, when it was cooler, we took off our shirts and lay in the sun. The Captain had brought a sackful of fresh pineapples, and until nightfall we sat around the wheelhouse eating them and singing. As the wind died away completely the sea also became quite smooth, and the schooner seemed to be the only real thing in a vast flat world. Far away to the south we could just make out a row of tall palms black against the evening sky. Our wake, white and phosphorescent, was the only other break in the horizon.

As night closed over us it became apparent that the weather was not to stay fine. Squalls are sudden and violent in the Caribbean, and a white squall sometimes catches unawares a ship that has been lying becalmed ten minutes earlier. Captain Macdonald thought that the sky looked bad, and pointed to the cloud flecks, silver in the moonlight, that were beating up from the south-east. The schooner was seaworthy and strong enough to ride through any kind of weather ; but the danger lay in finding ourselves caught off the Patuca Bar, which was surrounded by coral reefs. Even in the calmest weather the passage into Brewer's Lagoon is not

easy to find. The Diesel, too, was unreliable, and we wanted to make sure of having plenty of room off the land. The Captain changed course slightly and as we headed away from shore the short seas caught the schooner's counter and she began to lurch diagonally. We turned the dory and the dinghy upside down on deck and lashed them across from rail to rail.

By midnight it became obvious that the Captain had been right, and we were in for a bad time. The sky was heavy along the eastern and south-eastern horizons, and the stars were quite hidden. There was still little wind, but the sea showed that it was not far off. Captain Macdonald took the wheel. We sat and waited.

The squall hit us suddenly. As often happens in the Caribbean, it finally came from the opposite direction to that from which it was expected. We had been anxiously scanning the eastern sky, when it hit us astern with such fierce violence that we scarcely realized what was happening. The only sign we had of its approach was the black angry line on the sea, faintly visible for a moment in the moonlight as it rushed towards us.

The mainsail had long since been lowered and stowed away, and the only sail we now carried was a small jib which had been left standing to make the schooner steer more steadily.

The first quick sweep of the squall did no damage. We shipped a good deal of water, but nothing on deck was carried away. Nigel and I made our way to the wheelhouse and sheltered in front of it before the squall struck. Captain Macdonald was at the wheel with the mate, Carlos and the assistant engineer were below

tending to the engine, and the rest of the crew were on the foredeck clinging to the hatch coaming.

No sooner had the first gust of wind passed than it set in to blow steadily from astern, and the seas began to rise higher and higher above the schooner's counter. We started to plunge, and the schooner buried her bows heavily in the water. Macdonald rang down to Carlos to reduce speed, as the seas behind us were curling threateningly. He called us into the wheelhouse.

There was no use, he thought, in going on. This might last for several days ; the gales that blow in the bad season are irregular and unpredictable. We agreed with him that it would be best to run to the Islands for shelter while we could. If we went on now, we had no chance of finding the entrance to the Lagoon, still less of getting through the reefs to reach it. We should be blown away east and south towards the South Atlantic, with no other shelter to turn to. And if the engine failed, as he hourly expected, we should have a long hard beat to get back under our short canvas. He eased the wheel over and for a sickening moment we were broadside on to the seas, rolling in the lurch. Then he brought her up into the wind and we began to cut diagonally across them towards Roatán.

As dawn broke the eastern sky was a broken livid red and the whole heavens were tinged with an angry hue. The wind remained, and we slashed choppily through the white wave caps. Mountains of spray leapt from the schooner's heavy bows. To starboard there was still no sign of land ; had it been calm we might have

seen spray on the reefs or the tops of palm trees on some of the outlying islands, but we were too low in the water to discern anything in the distance. It was invigorating and pleasant, after the lazy hours we had spent in the heat of yesterday's calm, to feel the schooner leaping and driving underfoot, and to have the salt spray beating high over our heads. There was no question of breakfast, for it was found that the after side of the galley had been stove in and all the provisions were soaked ; the primus, too, was smashed beyond repair. The cook found some biscuits that were partly dry, we produced a bottle of Jamaica rum, and the Captain more pineapples, and we called the crew aft to make the best of it.

Chapter Four

COXXEN HOLE

IT was late afternoon when we sailed up to Roatán. The sea still ran high, but the sky was cloudless and it was hard to believe that less than twenty-four hours earlier we had been running before a fierce squall. The islanders ashore were crowding down to the beach as we drew near, to welcome us and find out why the *Perla del Mar* should be calling at Port Royal at such an unexpected time. They danced and shrieked with excitement, and those who could not restrain their curiosity even started to swim out to us, but the Captain signalled to them that we could not land yet, as we had first to make our way to Coxxen Hole to get *pratique* from the Island *Comandante*. We sailed in as close as we dared, then turned to the north-east and started to beat along the coast. The islanders ran along the sand.

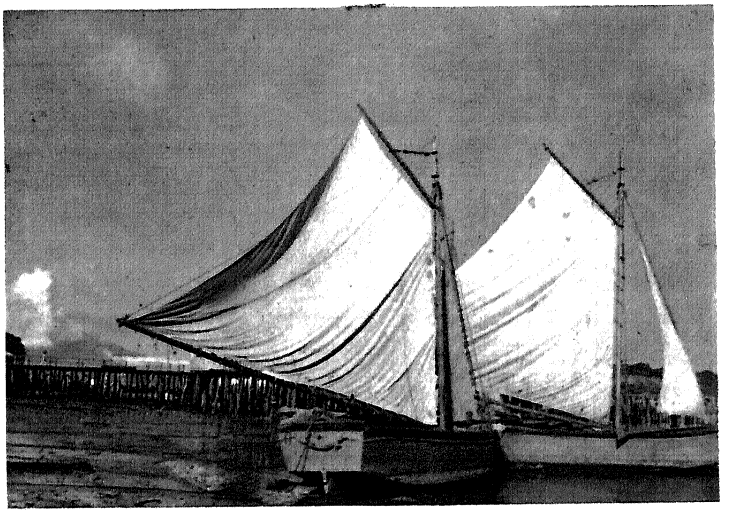
For several hours we followed the line of the great yellow beach, not a quarter of a mile off shore. Night fell with the suddenness of the tropics, and after a few minutes all we could see of Roatán was the blackness of the palms against the starry sky. Ashore, from time to time, there glowed the smoky fires of the black Carib tribes, who have their villages away from those of the whites. Some of the Caribs were singing, and an occasional wild note reached us across the water. Once or

twice we caught a glimpse of dugout canoes, riding high over the great waves, regardless of wind and darkness. The Caribs are wonderful watermen, and will go anywhere in their tiny canoes, which are built to enclose all but the head and shoulders of their passenger, something like the eskimo kayak. The Carib is more at home in his *cayuka* than he is on foot, and if he must travel along a beach for a hundred yards, he will launch his *cayuka* and paddle along two or three yards off shore. Most of the Caribs live on fish, which they harpoon with astonishing accuracy.

By two o'clock in the morning we had reached Coxxen Hole, and it seemed, to say the least, improbable that we should be able to rouse the *Comandante* sufficiently to accomplish any official business. As we approached the wharf, Captain Macdonald began to show signs of reluctance to going ashore at all, and we guessed that he was no friend of the *Comandante*, who was, as we were to find out, a drunkard as intolerant as he was ill-tempered. But he was the supreme authority in Roatán, and the three cutters of the Honduran Government (one of which has no engine) were willing, if not actually prepared, to back him up if necessary. Captain Macdonald had defied authority on a number of occasions in his capacity as the wealthy *enfant terrible* of the Caribbean, but it appeared that this particular official had a personal grudge against him, and among Latin Americans a personal grudge is the one influence stronger than money. So we anchored noisily in the little bay opposite the *Comandancia* and Macdonald muttered a few choice eighteenth-century

imprecations, doubtless handed down from his grandfather, in the direction of his enemy. For a long time Nigel and I were too interested in the island to go to sleep. We sat on the upturned dory and stared at the village, where a handful of adventurous souls had created an isolated and rebel British colony so many years before. We thought of the agonies they must have endured when they first realized that they could never return, and that they had for ever given up hope of attaining those things for which they had fought and plundered with Captain Morgan. The island looked strangely peaceful, but it had about it that air of tropical decay which clings to all the coasts of the Caribbean. It was alive, but it seemed limp and lifeless. Morgan's buccaneers must have found it an island paradise when they first landed there, suddenly safe from storms and shipwrecks and the yardarms of the Admiralty : but before many years had passed they wished themselves back in the pubs of Plymouth and Falmouth at any price, and even the hated press gang must have seemed a menace preferable to the deadly limp solitude of the Islands. Night in the Caribbean is more noisy than day, and for anyone unused to the tropics the incessant strumming and croaking of the jungle is almost maddening. There are mosquitoes in swarms that one can hardly imagine, and it is doubtful if a white man would live through a night in the open without the protection of a mosquito-bar. And when the mosquitoes retire at daybreak they are replaced by sandflies, fat slow insects that one can squash by the handful—but they swarm in tens of thousands, and a handful makes no difference—

COXXEN HOLE



PORT ROYAL, ROATÁN

and their stings are many times more painful than those of mosquitoes. The island folk of to-day are well used to defending themselves from insect life, but their grandfathers must have spent many months of acute misery before they became at all comfortable in their romantic isolation.

According to the legends of the islanders, their forefathers were all pirates, and no trace can be found for them of more law-abiding colonist ancestors. Even the oldest men seem to know nothing definite, although from time to time one of them embarks, in a fit of scholarly energy, on the composition of an island history. None of these works are completed and in any case they consist usually of a sequence of malicious gossip about the parents of islanders not liked by the author. There are very few surnames to be found—the names of Kirkconnell, Cooper, Eden, McNab, Bodden, Warren and Woodville, I think, cover almost all the families. English is still spoken everywhere, quite pure, but with that peculiar sing-song intonation that seems to affect all white colonies which exist in close proximity to negroes. There is a tremendous colour-feeling, and practically no inter-marriage between whites and blacks takes place. For this reason the islanders are inclined to look down on the Mainland people, who are largely of mixed blood, and this makes the domination of an alien government particularly irksome. Until 1859, let it be understood, the Bay islanders belonged to the British Crown, although they had never been exploited or officially colonized. Apart from the outlawed pirate families there was no one to uphold the honour of the

Union Jack; but these, who should have been the bitterest enemies of the King and his great fleet, developed a tremendous loyalty to the Crown and the *weltschmerz* which had been growing among them gradually turned to militant patriotism. By the time of Queen Victoria, the island folk had forgotten all the fear of their fathers for England, and had become almost jingoistically British. They were not officially recognized, but this did not discourage their loyalty: and in 1859 when Queen Victoria misguidedly chose to rid herself of the Bay Islands and the 'Mosquito Coast' of what is now Honduras and Nicaragua, there was great consternation among the loyalist islanders. Deputations were sent and petitions made up, pleas and threats of all kinds were used to impress the Queen with the unwillingness of the islanders to serve any throne but her own: but the Treaty of Comayagua stood, and the islanders were deprived of the sovereignty which their ancestors had flaunted.

Since the ratification of the Treaty of Comayagua there has been a continual struggle between Islanders and Mainlanders. The island families, for many reasons, consider that their British stock is superior to the confusion of Spanish, Indian and Negro blood which populates the mainland, and there has never been the slightest feeling of subjection. The Honduran Government, one imagines, must by this time realize that the old lady was more shrewd than they thought. Not one effective step has to this day been taken in any direction to develop the Islands or to exploit the wealth of the Mosquito Coast.

Upon the assumption of sovereignty over the Islands by the Honduran Republic, Don Santos Guardiola, at that time 'Captain-General and President of Honduras,' issued a manifesto announcing that the islanders would continue to have the same rights as they had enjoyed under the British Crown. Exactly what this meant was doubtful, for the rights of the island folk were negative rather than positive. The most that can be said is that they were left kindly to their own devices, and from time to time their islands were used as a repository for rebellious negroes exported from other settlements of the West Indies. At Port Royal, it is true, a small fort was established after the arrival of a large shipload of turbulent Caribs from St. Vincent in 1797, and upon the removal of the British garrison the one solemn cannon, which was left where it stood, was put to practical use as a sacrificial block by the Caribs who joyfully resumed the customs so long forbidden : but apart from the fort there is no evidence that anything was done by the Crown to develop the Islands. The manifesto of Captain Santos Guardiola was valid, as far as it went, and for many years the Honduran Government was too much occupied with internal affairs and impending invasions to bother itself with a handful of potential revolutionaries on a group of islands sixty miles away in the Caribbean Sea. But to the loyal islanders the ignorance of the Honduran Government completely eclipsed in undesirability the inaction of the British authority, and for many years feeling ran high. Islanders never visited the mainland, and the mainlanders were too busy fighting the other

four Central American Republics to make their way out to the islands. Finally, with solemn British reason, the islanders relieved their own distress by formally renouncing the Treaty of Comayagua, and in conclave overruling the decision of Queen Victoria. From that day to this they have never admitted to any other allegiance but the British Crown.

To-day the population of the Islands consists of Whites, Blacks, a few half-breeds, and a scattering of Honduran *Mestizos* who have settled on the islands for one reason or another. These, too, are mostly of mixed blood : many come from the Nicaraguan frontier of Honduras, whence they have fled, for all along the disputed border-line fighting is almost continuous, and bandits, too, are numerous, for the province is too far from Tegucigalpa for any attempt at policing to be made. Of the original Indian population, which presumably came many centuries ago from some part of the Chorutegan mainland, there remains no trace, for in 1650 all the tribes were forcibly removed to Guatemala by the Spaniards, and since 1502 when Christopher Columbus visited the islands they had gradually been depleted by slave raids. The total population of all the islands together is now no more than 4,000, of which possibly half are white. The remainder—in fact all those who cannot claim British ancestry—are negroes, some of West Indian and some of Carib stock. Many of the negroes are the great-grandchildren of fugitive slaves who escaped from British bondage in the West Indies. Taken as a whole the island folk seem happy in their isolation and rarely take the opportunity of

deserting the islands, although they sail their schooners away, with cargoes of bananas and copra, to the Caribbean countries and even as far as Tampa and New Orleans. But they always come back to the islands : it seems as if the peculiar enclosed life they have led makes them unhappy in a larger world. They have something of the inconsequential kind of madness that, I think, affects all those who live on small islands.

Economically the Bay Islands are, of course, agricultural, although a certain number of the people—chiefly Caribs—live largely on fish. Most of the islanders lead a pleasant and easy life on the fruits of earth and sea : but those who have inherited something of the adventurous spirit of their fathers capitalize the revolutions which occur, with ridiculous regularity, among the Five Republics. The islanders carry arms and ammunition in their schooners, frequently for both sides at the same time. In this way, obviously enough, the Bay Islanders are a continual source of provocation to the Honduran Government.

Nigel and I sat on deck with the men until nearly dawn, singing and talking interminably about the Islands. From the cabin, Captain Macdonald snored. The *Perla del Mar* rose and fell heavily in the ground swell, and there was a continual grinding clank as the anchor chains strained and slackened. We dragged badly towards the beach, but no one paid any attention. From shore came the indescribable croaking throb of the jungle.

Coxxen Hole was considerably surprised to see us

lying off the wharf the next morning, and as soon as it was light the shore-line was clustered with groups of islanders who stared speculatively at the schooner, waiting for the *Comandante* to clear our papers before they paddled or swam out to us.

The *Comandante* took his time. In a port where a schooner appears perhaps once in three months, one must make the pleasures of discipline last. And he probably recognized his enemy Macdonald. After breakfast we began to grow impatient. It seemed, for all the activity that was to be seen in the *Comandancia*, as if we were to be kept aboard for hours to come. Macdonald and the crew were not impatient, for they were used to the delays of the tropics, and they were as happy doing nothing aboard the schooner as they would have been doing nothing on the beach. For us, however, it was different. Our time for the whole expedition was limited, and we had no idea of the delays that might still lie between us and Mosquitia. We were anxious to be off again.

At ten o'clock nothing had been done, and much of the best part of the day had slipped idly by. Captain Macdonald refused to go ashore and approach the *Comandante*, and insisted that it was the strictest of local practices for advances to be made in the reverse order.

Luckily we had a card up our sleeve which promised to relieve the situation with astonishing speed. Nigel and I jumped into the dory and rowed ashore, to the consternation and surprise of Captain Macdonald and those on the beach, who had come prepared to see at

least some display of unfriendliness between the *Perla del Mar* and the civil authority.

We knocked loudly at the rickety wooden door of the *Comandancia*. The *Comandante* was having breakfast. An enormous dish of red beans stood in the middle of the table, surrounded by smaller plates of rice, meat and obscure vegetables. The *Comandante* and his family each had a large spoon with which they attacked the communal board. As we came in they turned for a moment and stared woodenly at us with solid Indian eyes.

I produced the letter which General Carías had given us, commending us to the care of all his officers civil, naval, and military. The envelope was a very large one, and in the top left-hand corner there stood out boldly emblazoned the arms of the Republic.

As the *Comandante* took it from me, we could see that he could not read, and his wife whispered the message into his ear as she read over his shoulder. Clearly the signature at the end was enough to perform miracles. He sprang to his feet and with a gesture sent the children flying out of the house. Chairs were pushed forward, breakfast was forgotten, and a large bottle of colourless liquid appeared. We explained, without much conviction, that we were in a great hurry and could not stay. This was regarded merely as a form of good manners, and obviously we had no chance of escaping for some time. Perhaps, we began to feel, we should have been wiser to lie low in the schooner and let matters take their ponderous course.

As we had feared, the bottle contained *Aguardiente*,

the local form of liquor. It is the only form of refreshment which appears to give pleasure to the people of the Honduran coast. The name is perhaps derived from *Agua* and *Diente*, meaning ' the water with teeth,' and perhaps from *Agua* and *Ardente*, which would mean ' the water that burns.' In either case it is excellently named. I shall never forget the raw searing taste of that drink, taken at ten o'clock in the morning from a cracked glass which bore the deceptive legend ' Odol ' in faded blue letters around the side. No sooner had we managed to finish a glass each than the *Comandante* poured out a second round. It was probably our look of acute misery that prompted him to produce his cigars, perhaps the only thing imaginable less pleasant than his *Aguardiente*. They were native *Puros*, long, thick, and black, and they burned with a heavy greenish smoke. They sizzled continually, like those allegedly humorous cigars that are designed to explode when the victim has politely smoked an inch or two. There was no refusing them.

We sat there for nearly two hours, Nigel and I in our dirty singlets and dungaree trousers, the *Comandante* in a delicate lavender shirt and a pair of tight black alpaca trousers supported by a pair of crossed cartridge belts. His revolvers were stuck, one on either side, into the top of his trousers. He wore no shoes. He told us about the Islands and groped feebly towards some understanding of what we wanted to do and where we came from. From the doorway his children and other children stared silently, sloe-shaped eyes never leaving us for a minute. The *Señora* in her flattened

bare feet bustled back and forth about the room, ineffectually trying to make it tidy in our honour.

When the ritual of Honduran politeness had been satisfied, the *Comandante* accompanied us back to the schooner and commandeered two Caribs to row for us. His name, we had by now discovered, was Don Tomás, and the effect of the *Aguardiente* had been to make his affection and esteem for us eclipse his dislike for Captain Macdonald, which was a feud of many years' standing. He came aboard and waved the schooner's papers airily away. Such things, it seemed, were for ordinary people, not for those who bore letters from General Carías and were invited to drink *Guarro* with the *Comandante*.

Don Tomás had himself taken several glasses to each one of ours, and now showed no signs of wanting to break up the party. We looked pointedly at our watches, and Captain Macdonald scanned the sky with histrionic anxiety, but he showed no signs of intending ever to go ashore again. Finally we gave him a bottle of rum, to which he was not accustomed, and it was only a question of time before we were able to lower him back into his boat. The Caribs rowed him home and we started out to sea again.

When we had cleared Coxxen Hole and were a little way out to sea, Macdonald declared that the bad weather had gone, and that we might now make for Brewer's Lagoon without danger of meeting with a squall or finding ourselves in difficulties off the Bar. We were both pleased and disappointed. Our time

was very short, and we had many miles to go before we reached the head waters of the Patuca. But there was something fascinating about the islanders which made us want to linger there and see more of their lost community ; we wanted to go ashore and see for ourselves how the island folk lived. It was with regret that we saw the great palms of Roatán sinking below the horizon astern. Twelve miles off shore the cylinder-head blew off the Diesel. We went about and made for Port Royal under mainsail and jib.

Chapter Five

ROATÁN

PORT ROYAL, too, was glad to see us. There were no formalities, for Port Royal is an entirely 'British' settlement, and such Honduran officials as must live on the islands find it pleasanter to live in peaceful isolation slightly removed from the scorn of the island aristocracy. Port Royal is the capital and social centre of the Archipelago. We limped into the harbour under the clumsy old mainsail, which had never been intended for more than an auxiliary to the Diesel. It was patched and torn in a dozen places and half the reef points were missing.

No sooner had we touched the wharf than we were invaded by islanders, some coming in frank curiosity to see the strangers, and some being friends and relations of Captain Macdonald and his crew. Macdonald with unpatriotic honesty had locked all our equipment in the cabin. Before long it was impossible to move on the schooner's deck, and still more people swarmed on board, jumping from the wharf or clambering up from the sea. They showed no signs of shyness and timidity, but came up and shook us warmly by the hand. On the wharf someone was playing a guitar, and two or three voices sang.

Port Royal is built on wooden stilts, the whole town

precariously poised over the water of the lagoon. Each little house has its four legs driven deep down into the mud, and in addition to bearing the weight of the houses these piles also support, communally, the planked gangways which run from door to door. The settlement is entirely nailed together in a wooden tangle of planks and logs that is a triumph of architectural socialism : each house supports the next and the burden of the public way is shared. Beneath the paths and under the floor of the houses there circulate freely canoes, dinghies, and dories, which are usually moored beneath their owners' cabins. Getting from place to place for an unguided stranger is very difficult, for the planked gangways run this way and that in an incredible wooden maze, which is particularly difficult at night because many of the planks have rotted away and fallen through into the sea. Since most of the commercial activity of the island waterfront is best left uninvestigated, Port Royal is an ideal harbour and an eternal thorn in the side of the Honduran Customs office. Every house is a potential warehouse, and it is quite impossible for the clumsy black police of the *Comandancia* to keep any kind of watch on the activities that go on beneath the village.

Smuggling and gun-running in the Caribbean are lucrative occupations and do not seem to be fraught with any particular dangers. Central American governments are usually far too busy with internal affairs to devote ships and men to the suppression of smuggling. When a revolution is in the wind among the Five Republics, schooner after schooner steals away from

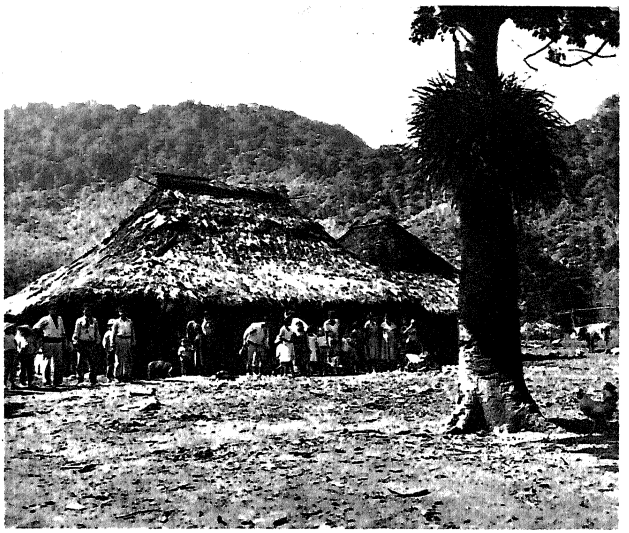
Roatán, and it sometimes happens that for several months most of the men are gone. The leaders of the island have many contacts, in the outer world, with those who are interested in the supply and demand for arms. They always maintain a strictly neutral viewpoint themselves, for the politics of Latin America do not affect their lives.

Captain Macdonald, in fact, declared that it was not uncommon for a schooner to carry contraband weapons for both sides in the same shipment, leaving half at one *rendez-vous* and sailing on to deliver the other half somewhere else. Even during the rare months when there is complete peace in the Caribbean and no one is as much as thinking of a revolution, an atmosphere of contraband, which is justified by observation, seems to linger about Roatán. Schooners appear and disappear in the night, carrying no cargo and no passengers : cargo is discharged, as far as one can see, for years on end into tiny warehouses from which nothing is ever taken. In addition the islanders are for the most part far too well off to have earned their money entirely by the selling of their half-hearted banana crops and copra.

Until the repeal of prohibition in the United States many of the schooners occupied themselves with running rum from the Mexican coast, but in time this became too dangerous, and only the most adventurous were not discouraged by the accurate marksmanship of the American Coast Guards. There are still one or two craft lying near Roatán which were specially built when rum-running was at its height—fast launches with

powerful engines—but they are too expensive to run for other purposes. Captain Macdonald told us also that a certain amount of money was made every year by smuggling Chinamen into the United States. Only a small number of immigrant Orientals are allowed into America every year, and many of those who are turned away find their way south to the Caribbean Islands, where they are willing to part with as much as thirty or forty pounds to be landed secretly on the coast of Florida. A certain Captain Noah Eden, who recently lost his schooner and his life in a hurricane, specialized in this kind of smuggling, but was particularly unscrupulous in his treatment of the Chinamen. If the weather to the northward showed signs of turning nasty, he would stow his passengers below, sail twice around the island, and land them in a deserted inlet on the far side. Here he would generously give them a packet of food each with a warning to lie low in the bush for a day or two before showing their faces. By the time the Chinamen had discovered where they really were, the Captain and his schooner were well away for Belize or the Caymans.

It was decided that we should remain for several days on Roatán. There was no available schooner to replace the *Perla del Mar*, and we had no alternative but to wait till the Diesel was replaced or repaired. To attempt our entry into Brewer's Lagoon without an engine would have been ridiculous, for the Patuca Bar is tricky and dangerous, fully exposed to the force of the Atlantic. In addition it is surrounded by reefs, which lie barely visible beneath the water, and a boat sailing



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through them must answer more accurately to her helm than one could expect the *Perla del Mar* to do under her tattered mainsail.

To remain on the schooner for the night was out of the question. She was tied up alongside the wharf, and as night fell over the island we could hear the rising hum of the mosquitoes. To sleep safely we had either to make out to sea again or to protect ourselves by getting indoors and rigging up mosquito bars. There is a kind of guest house at Roatán, a large wooden shanty that is kept for occasional visitors, and since Captain Macdonald lived at Port Royal and was anxious to go home, we were encouraged to stay in the guest house for as long as we chose. A dozen or more boys fought to carry our bags ashore, and the rest of the population trooped behind in friendly curiosity as we made our way along the wharf. We picked our way precariously, in the half-light of evening, over irregular wooden planks and over great holes where the timber had rotted away and there was nothing underfoot but the water of the lagoon.

From the first there was nothing that the islanders did not do to make us comfortable. We were treated royally, with the most insistent and lavish abundance. Our house was piled high, day by day, with pineapples and guavas and avocado pears, and as each meal-time drew near a messenger arrived with an invitation for us to a different house. That first night we dined with Captain Dick, a swarthy pirate, one of three brothers who were the chief planters, navigators and ship-

wrights of the island. We never knew his surname ; for in Roatán when one has achieved a measure of distinction one becomes, automatically, a Captain, and nothing but a Christian name is used with the rank. It was an enormous noisy meal, and the fourteen islanders who sat at the table never tired of firing at us unexpected and usually unanswerable questions about England. The loyalty of their interest is astonishing ; nearly every room in Captain Dick's house was decorated with a picture of the King, and in the dining-room a large Union Jack served honourably as a dignified and decorative tablecloth.

As we sat around in the twilight after dinner our expedition to the Mosquito Coast seemed infinitely remote, and it was hard to remember that less than two months ago we had been in England. Around us the ring of sturdy sunburnt faces stared intently, never missing a word, endlessly questioning and wondering. Until late into the night we sat looking out over the water, answering questions and listening to their high sing-song voices that seemed to have no consonants. The islands and the island folk seemed very unreal. . . . Here were some four thousand men and women, more than half of them white, who played so little part in the affairs of our world that one had barely heard of them in England.

Perhaps it was the rum they gave us that put us in a platitudinous mood.

In appearance there is little to distinguish the Bay islander from his seaman counterpart in any British

port, except that in the general run he is taller, better built, and healthier. Almost any of the white island folk could pass unnoticed in Portsmouth or Southampton, but I think that it is in Cornwall that they would find themselves most at home, for they are strikingly like Cornish fishermen. A certain amount of new blood has been brought in by the women, but many of these come from Belize in British Honduras and are themselves British in origin. There is a constant struggle on the islands to get hold of new blood, for the stock is beginning to show faint signs of inbreeding. Great efforts are always made when the schooners are away in foreign ports to bring new brides to the islands. For some reason there is a great shortage of girls in the recent generations of islanders, and the men outnumber them by about five to one.

From talking to Captain Dick we gathered that the smouldering resentment against the mainland government had been slowly increasing during the last few years, and, he hinted darkly, if occasion arose the flame of revolt could easily enough be kindled. But if a break were made with Honduras, the problem would remain unsolved ; for such tentative suggestions of return to British allegiance as have been made have been regarded in official circles as merely frivolous, and the islanders are hardly in a position to set up for themselves as an independent state. Ever since the Treaty of Comayagua, the Honduran Government has made efforts towards a *rapprochement* with the islands, but their advances have been met with such scorn that during the last few years misguided but more forceful

methods have been put into effect. It is forbidden, although one would never know it from a visit to the islands, to post notices or signs in any language but Spanish ; Spanish must be used in all official communications, and English has been banned from the school. Since very few of the islanders know any Spanish at all these dictatorial methods merely add humour and confusion to the situation. Latin Americans are not colonizers.

The rising heat of anti-mainland feeling on the islands is due, in common with so many political disturbances, to taxation. The Honduran Government, it is held, does not keep its promises. For a number of years sums of money have been voted and set aside for public works in the islands, and aerodromes, power stations and vast highways have been planned. With magnificent recklessness the Government, knowing well enough that it will no longer be in office in three months' time, draws up plans for town halls, schools, public libraries and roads wide enough for four cars abreast. Weekly steamer services and hotels are talked of. But to this day no constructive step has been taken to spend any Honduran money on the islands. And, worse still from the islanders' point of view, even the money they pay out themselves in taxes is spent on the mainland.

The nationalization of the islanders, if it takes place at all, will be a long slow process, and it is eternally delayed by the frequency with which the reins of authority change hands in Tegucigalpa. There is no common ground : islanders look down on mainlanders, and the Hondurans are inclined to regard the island folk as

pirates or half-savages on a par with the wild Carib tribes. The differences of race, language and religion militate strongly against the formation of any kind of bonds. Recently the Government has redoubled its efforts to enforce a *rapprochement.* Trade of one kind and another has been encouraged, and the Governor of the islands, until recently an islander of British descent, has been replaced by a Spanish *Coronel* from Tegucigalpa.

It was six whole days before the schooner's Diesel was repaired and refitted in the shipyard at Port Royal. During that time we saw most of the islands : we paddled and sailed among them freely, sleeping and eating wherever we happened to be. We watched Captain Dick and his relations as they shaped a new schooner from great logs of red mahogany and Santa Maria, and we excavated ignorantly among the ruins of ancient Indian offertories ; we harpooned fish with the Caribs and we bathed, early in the morning and in the cool of late afternoon, from the long sandy beaches.

As each day passed the urgency of sailing for Brewer's Lagoon and the Patuca seemed less and less important. There was a fascination in the peace of this forgotten community.

The shipbuilding craft of the Bay Islands is unsurpassed anywhere in the Caribbean, and from all over equatorial America craft are ordered from Roatán. There is no wood stronger than the island Santa Maria, and no scientific naval architect knows better than Cap-

tain Dick how to build a vessel that is to ride safely through squalls and hurricanes. The island boats, like the *Perla del Mar*, are enormously broad, and are ribbed internally with natural crooks. Captain Dick never made any plans on paper. His first step was to carve, in bold clean strokes, a beautifully shaped half-model from a block of Santa Maria. This he measured and shaped and shaved till the curves up the hull satisfied himself and the critical eyes of his brothers. Once the model was finished and approved, the full-sized boat was laid down directly from it in great beams and blocks of seasoned wood. The Captain was an artist with the adze, which he used for all the shaping of the hull. We watched for hours, fascinated, as he swung the blade like lightning through the air in a wide arc and brought it diagonally against the schooner's side, to send a flimsy curled shaving flying across the yard. Everything was done by eye alone. His family contributed in lesser ways to the building : the women cut sails and the men were riggers, fitters and painters. Like the seamen on our own schooner, they worked in silence and without confusion. Slowly the new craft took shape, and before we left Roatán the blocks of rough-hewn wood had taken a shape that was alive and beautiful.

I am not an archæologist, and Nigel is as ignorant. It was with a feeling of sacrilegious trespass that we scraped away sand and earth from the site of an ancient Indian offertory which Captain Dick had shown us. Much had been done among the islands some years before by a learned American excavator, who had

shipped his trophies to a museum in Chicago : but this shrine had been uncovered only a few months earlier by a Carib boy. No one had bothered to dig farther down. Old and broken pots are of no interest to an islander.

The offertory stood high up on a ridge above Port Royal, in a rocky little clearing flanked by palms. Over the port it commanded a view of the clear blue Caribbean, scarcely darker, in the sunlight, than the sky. On each side was the almost impenetrable thickness of the bush, so that it gave the impression of a three-walled chamber open only on the seaward side. A narrow path led, deviously, to the village below. Here and there the earth had been disturbed. We burned away the scrub in the clearing and began to scrape at the soil with flat stones. It was slow, hard work. The offertory was apparently about fifty feet square and there was a thickness of about two feet for us to penetrate, but luckily the earth was soft and crumbling. It was fiendishly hot in the full blaze of the tropical sun. After three hours of digging and scraping we had found :

1. A three-foot length of iron piping.
2. A small wooden barrel (empty).
3. Seven very rusty eight-inch nails.

Below these archæological treasures the soil promised to extend, undisturbed, for a distance downwards of many yards. But if we did not find votive pots, metates and mace heads, we started a discussion that was of far more interest in Port Royal. Our trophies were evidently a group of recent origin, but by their nature they

gave very little key to the activities of whoever had taken the trouble to bury them. And in a community where every enterprise is supposed to be strictly communal, this could only mean one thing : someone was double-crossing the others. For the rest of the time we were there, Roatán was charged with an air of intrigue and suspicion, and the only topic of conversation was the evidence of treachery we had unwittingly unearthed. And, as far as I know, the mystery of the iron pipe, the barrel, and the seven rusty nails still remains unsolved.

But the Bay Islands can boast of more serious archæological excavations. Among the houses of Port Royal there are scattered, as curios of no particular interest, odd pieces of ancient pottery, and Captain Dick had a collection of small votive articles—copper bells, pendants and tiny figurines—which had been found in a large vase at the site of a shrine on Roatán. There was also a large coloured jug, with three short legs and a pair of handles, decorated exotically with a dark-red serpent. It is hard to deduce, from the scant evidence that has been found, what were the origins of the original Indian tribes of the islands, and the report of the Smithsonian Institute after their excavations in 1933 does little to settle the question. Perhaps it will be best, for the benefit of the anthropologically minded reader, to quote the conclusion of the Smithsonian report.

> As a whole the material from the islands is surprising. In many things it agrees with the adjacent Chorotegan mainland, but there are also many traits showing more

distant connections. Much of the pottery, especially the thin polychrome ware (predominantly from the upper layers), certain greenstone carvings, and the mace heads, are more characteristic of the Nicoya peninsula on the Pacific. The copper bells, stone knives, plumed heads, and some of the ceramics point to the north and west. Particularly striking are a number of vessels closely duplicating, in pottery, beautiful marble vases from the Ulva valley (on the mainland). Finally in lugs and incised decoration on the unslipped pottery are certain Antillean resemblances. As to the ultimate derivation of this rather heterogeneous composite, preliminary study suggests South American rather than northern origins.

There is still a vast amount of research to be done by an enterprising archæologist, in a dozen known sites on Roatán, in the gloomy mangrove swamps of Helena, and high up in the rocky hills of Barburata. But it is a task for an expert, a serious scholar who can take his learned time about it. We were too busy to attempt any serious archæological work, even had we known how to proceed, and in addition there would have been no way for us to bring such relics as we found back to England. We could hardly encumber ourselves in Mosquitia with cases of potsherds and fragile vases, and we had no intention of returning to the islands after leaving the Mosquito country. The origins of the ancient Indians, we decided, were less important than our expedition to the headwaters of the Patuca. They remain a mystery.

Six days was, we felt, the ideal length of time to stay on the islands. Less would have left us with a feeling

of unsatisfied curiosity, more would have allowed tedium to eclipse some of their charm. The strangeness of the place could not have made up after another day or so for the pestilence of insect life. The kindness of the islands had already begun to seem less important than a change of diet. We were saturated.

As we drew away from Port Royal the islanders paddled with us far out into the bay, for the sea was as flat as glass and the sky cloudless. Our mainsail hung limply against the mast. We shouted last farewells and one by one the canoes dropped away astern. Captain Macdonald rang for more speed and Roatán sank slowly below the rim of the horizon.

There was nothing memorable in our passage from Port Royal to Brewer's Lagoon. The Diesel never faltered and the weather remained perfect. We sailed on interminably. For all that happened during those two empty days we might have been on a steam yacht in the Mediterranean. It was too regular and orderly to be interesting : and we had had in the last week a long enough rest in which to enjoy the merely pleasant. We were anxious, once again, to reach the Patuca without further delay. We busied ourselves with last-minute checking and re-checking up our plans, all of which we were to find, in a day or two, to be quite useless. We covered the deck with antiquated and incorrect maps. We packed and repacked our kit and provisions.

On the second morning the clear flatness of the sea was broken, a few yards off the starboard beam, by triangular fins cutting their way through the blue parallel to our course. They twisted this way and

that, disappeared and appeared again first on one side and then on the other, sometimes ahead and sometimes astern. Pale bellies showed a sickly green through the water. All day the sharks were with us, and in the evening we shot at them with revolvers as they rolled over to show their great maws. It was poor sport, for they were almost at point-blank range, but it was strangely unpleasant to see their grey fins continually alongside and we wanted to get rid of them. Before nightfall we had killed them all or driven them out of range, and the only sign of life in the sea was the incessant scurry of the flying fish as they took to the air when the shadow of our bows fell across them.

No other craft appeared until just before dusk. Far away on the silver rim of the horizon we suddenly caught sight of a tiny smoky blur, a black speck in the north-west which gradually grew until we could see, with binoculars, that she was a Honduran Government cutter from La Ceiba. She had evidently been on a course that would have taken her well astern of us, but when we came in sight she altered helm to converge with us and black smoke began to pour from her funnel as she increased speed. There seemed to be considerable excitement on her crowded deck. Presently we saw that she was crammed full of soldiers. They wore broad-brimmed straw *sombreros*, blue denim tunics, and no shoes. Each had a canvas bag slung across his shoulders for ammunition. Their flat faces were of a hundred shades of black and brown.

Captain Macdonald viewed the approach of the Government cutter with misgiving. He stood in the

cockpit and glared, but refused to slow down until some signal came from the other boat. He had no idea what it was all about. Living under the authority of a Central American Power cures one of any tendency towards astonishment or surprise. As a signal ran up on the Government cutter he shouted resignedly to Carlos and the Diesel stopped with a splutter. The mainsail and jib flapped idly.

Two generals in full dress clambered over our rail when their boat had finally been lowered away after several unsuccessful attempts. One of them was jet black, an enormous Negro who topped his colleague by head and shoulders. The smaller one, however, was the more important, and after glancing shrewdly around the schooner with beady Indian eyes it was he who came up to question Macdonald.

'*Como te llamas tu? De donde vienes?*'

The use of the familiar second person was insolent. Captain Macdonald shook his head and put on his stupidest expression.

'*Buenos dias, General;* me no savvy no *Espanol.*'

As a matter of fact he was one of the few islanders who spoke very good Spanish, but he had in the past found a policy of ignorance most likely to succeed in dealing with inquisitiveness. So used was he to being on opposite sides of the fence with authority that it never occurred to him that he was now engaged in a perfectly legitimate enterprise.

The Generals soon gave up trying to communicate with the Captain and retired into a huddle at the side of the schooner. Alongside, the cutter's sea boat, with

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a guard of soldiers, waited to take them back. They shouted to one of the soldiers who was supposed to speak English and he jumped aboard.

The generals had decided, the interpreter informed us haltingly, that we were to put about and accompany them in pursuit of a launchful of Nicaraguan bandits who had just made their way up from the south and were now heading along the Honduran coast. It is the custom for Government officials to commandeer any Honduran craft as they please, if there is a need to do so ; but this was obviously nothing but a display of pomposity. The Generals wisely nodded their heads in confirmation as the soldier explained what we were to do. There could be no reasonable purpose in doing what we were told. The cutter was already loaded down with soldiers and rifles, and the *Perla del Mar* was considerably the slower boat. Our presence could only delay the chase. When the soldier had finished we explained this in detailed Spanish. The Generals looked surprised and suspicious at our interference, but it made no difference to their orders. And in any case, their look implied, what could ignorant islanders know of important affairs of state such as these ? We had not shaved for over a week, and wore nothing but dirty dungaree trousers. They turned away and stared importantly over the schooner's rail.

Now to chase bandits around the Caribbean might have been amusing at a different time and under other circumstances, but we were badly behind time and also we wanted to make sure of reaching the Lagoon before the Diesel broke down again. The main bearings had

begun to show signs of running hot, and a full-speed chase would certainly have finished them off. We were particularly anxious to make straight for Brewer's.

There was nothing for it but to produce the President's letter again. As the Generals caught sight of the magic word ' Carías ' in the signature all their importance vanished in a flash, and even the gold braid in their uniforms seemed to grow duller. They apologized and stood, like embarrassed schoolboys, not knowing what to say. We gave them a drink and within the half-hour turned south again. As the cutter steamed away there was a puff of smoke and their salute rolled across the water to us.

Chapter Six

BREWER'S LAGOON

BREWER'S LAGOON is one of the ends of the earth. There can be few places, in the great jungles of Asia or in the vastness of the Polar regions, that give such an impression of lost desertion. It is utterly remote. It lies along the sandy north coast, some two hundred miles of water varying in depth from a few inches to six feet, and the land around it is so low-lying that for most of the year it is a mass of marsh and swampland, treacherous and unhealthy. On the north side it is almost cut off from the sea by a broad sandy spit, lined with palms, which leaves only one narrow gap through which the swollen waters of the Patuca make their way out to sea. The Patuca has two main outlets, one through its original course, which with time has spread so widely that the river-bed is now lost, and the land east of Brewer's Lagoon is one great swamp, and the other through the Lagoon by way of the Tom-Tom Cut-off, which joins the main river some hundred miles higher up. There are only three men who can find their way through the narrow channel of the lagoon, and we were to find that one of these, even, had considerable difficulties with his navigation.

In spite of its remoteness, there is activity around the mouth of the cut-off, for Brewer's Lagoon is the final

end of the fringe of civilization, and all enterprises which chose to operate farther afield in the Mosquito territory must use it for a base. There is a Carib village, there is a small house which is the residence of an Assistant *Comandante*, and there is a white man who chooses for his own reasons to live on the Lagoon. There are usually several *cayukas* and *pipantos* to be seen, being paddled or poled across the water. When the weather is fine a schooner calls every two or three weeks, but without some special reason it never ventures across the Patuca Bar, but remains outside in the open sea to unload its cargo into the Carib boats. Occasionally a crop of bananas which has escaped the hurricanes and floods is sent down the Patuca by the determined German planters who fight a continual desperate battle with the river.

It was just after four in the morning when we reached the mouth of the lagoon. The sea was still as flat as glass and there was no sign of wind. A full moon showed up the long sandy spit that stretched away as far as one could see, and the tiny gap which led to the lagoon looked extremely narrow. The *Perla del Mar* drew five feet ; over the Bar there was usually about six inches more than that. To get across the Bar itself should not be in any way difficult, but the danger lay in approaching it. It was surrounded by reefs, some of which were just visible, but most of which lay a few feet below the smooth surface of the water. With no sea running at all it was impossible to know where they lay.

After sailing up and down several times outside the lagoon Captain Macdonald decided to make out to sea

again. It was ridiculous to attempt an entry in a flat calm and by moonlight, so we were to wait and see if daylight brought wind with it. Dawn was already beginning to break, and as the morning grew the sea seemed, if possible, flatter and calmer than before. The sky was an unbroken blue and there was no sign of wind. We nosed our way in towards the passage and gathered in the bows to look out for reefs. Carlos set the Diesel to run as slowly as possible, and Macdonald steered from the wheelhouse according to our signals. The reefs were strong and sharp : a graze would be enough to do damage to the schooner's hull.

As we made our way in, the sea darkened in colour and presently it was so sandy from the spate of the Patuca water that we could see nothing, and Captain Macdonald dared go no further. We were in the thick of the reefs. To go back would be slow and difficult, and there was little room in which to turn. The only thing to do, he decided, was to lower the dinghy and let us row ahead, feeling out the passage for the schooner. Nigel and I and the Mate, who had been through the channel before, took the boat and with long bamboo poles felt laboriously for the reefs. The schooner followed as we reconnoitred each bend. After nearly three hours of rowing and sounding we were over the Bar and safely in the channel inside the lagoon. The noise of the anchor chains running out brought Caribs paddling to the schooner from all over the lagoon.

It was evident as soon as we arrived that a familiar

farce was to be replayed. The *Comandante* of Mosquitia was coming aboard to question us.

A tiny village on stilts stands to starboard inside the lagoon. It is no more than five or six native huts, clustered close together, and a slightly larger hut, standing apart, which is the *Comandancia*. The *Comandante* was an old man, white-haired and bent. He hurried down to the beach buckling on his ammunition belt, jumped into a *cayuka* and was paddled out to us in state by a Carib. But he was different to the other officials who had delayed us in the early stages of our journey. He was glad to see us and as he clambered over the schooner's side his lined Indian face was wreathed in smiles. He wore a broad-brimmed straw hat, a khaki shirt and a pair of bell-bottomed blue serge trousers. Around his waist were the inevitable crossed cartridge belts.

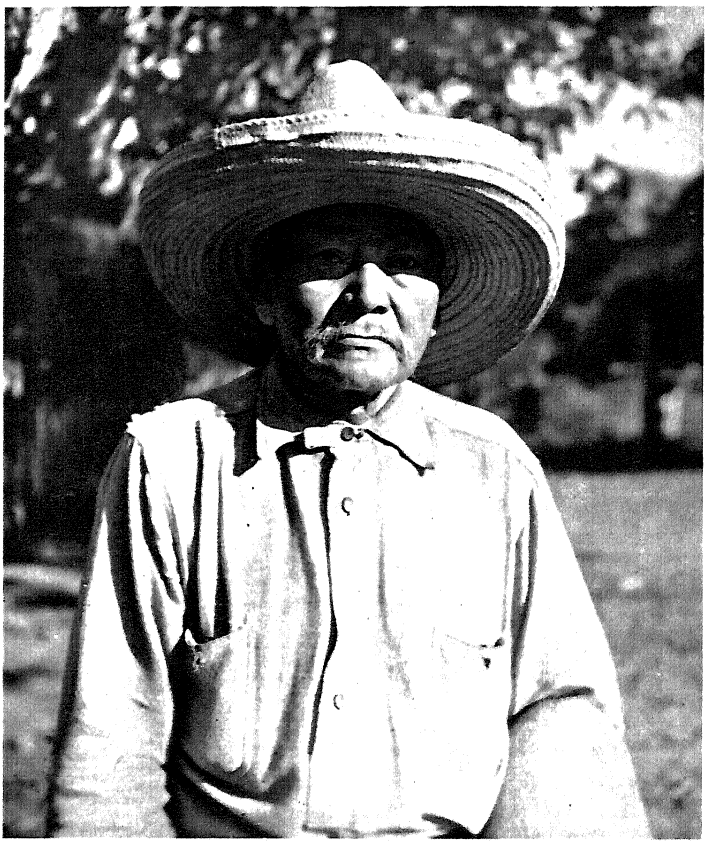
He shook hands all around and started off immediately in a chatter of Spanish that was to last for over an hour. Ship's papers were waved aside and he did not even glance at the great letter from General Carías. It appeared that he was the only Spanish-speaking person on the west side of the lagoon : the rest were Caribs, so he had had no one to talk to for several weeks. And as he pointed out, a little unnecessarily, he was fond of conversation. We were given news about the state of the river, the banana crops and the Caribs, the weather and the sea. He gave a list of all the schooners that had visited the lagoon since his term of office began, with the details of their affairs and intentions : and he was so busy and happy making the

best of this golden opportunity for ' conversation ' that he never once expressed interest or surprise at our presence in Brewer's Lagoon. This form of red tape, we thought at first, was possibly more boring but less unpleasant than the other. Perhaps we were unwise to think about such things at all, for there was evidently something which prompted *Don Miguel* to send his Carib boy back for a bottle of the very best *Aguardiente*—made in his own house as much as a whole month ago. Once again we went through the ordeal which we had undergone in Coxxen Hole : raw spirits and vile cigars in the middle of a sweltering hot tropical morning. This time Macdonald was in for it too, but it seemed to have less effect on him than on us. We sat around on the edge of the cockpit and looked out over the Lagoon while *Don Miguel* rambled on about every subject under the sun. For the first twenty minutes we had listened, for his attention had been turned to the affairs of his territory and we were eager for any news that might help us when once we started up the river. But when he left first Mosquitia, then Honduras, then Central America altogether, and started to tell us that *Parece que hay guerra civil en España* we began to lose interest in him and left Macdonald to do whatever was necessary to keep up the passive end of the conversation.

Long before the *Comandante* left us Caribs had arrived alongside from all over the lagoon and the schooner was the centre of a cluster of canoes and dories. Some brought fish to sell, some fruit, some came to offer their services if we wanted porters, and a great many came to stare and ask questions. Among the characteristic

Carib faces there began to appear also a different type : rather smaller and with a more Indian cast of features. These were Zambus, Indians of mixed blood from the Patuca country. All along the Caribbean coast there is a scattering of Zambu Indians among the Caribs and other negroes, and the lagoon seemed to have attracted a good many of them away from the higher reaches of the Patuca. Some of them had made their way along the coast to the west and had even worked as stevedores for the fruit companies, but most of them were uninterested in white men in general and soon came back to wilder country. English among the people of the lagoon was far better understood and spoken than Spanish, for throughout the territory there is a lingering British influence which has been more or less isolated and preserved by its remoteness.

In the middle of Brewer's Lagoon, at the western end, there stands a small round island, shaped rather like an inverted tea cup and not more than a hundred and fifty yards in diameter. It was closely covered with tropical scrub, and in a small clearing stood a solitary native hut made of plaited leaves. This is Cannon Island, which derives its name from the fact that it is the site of an ancient cannon placed there by British soldiers in the days when Mosquitia was a colony. The cannon is still there, covering the mouth of the lagoon with a rusty barrel that is now full of earth and leaves and rubbish. In La Ceiba we had been advised to consult a certain Robert Trapp who lived on Cannon Island, and who was supposed to know more about the Patuca river than anyone else.



Don Miguel Ramirez, Comandante of all Mosquitia

While *Don Miguel* continued to give his opinions on the Spanish situation as it was reported in the six-weeks'-old copy of a Nicaraguan newspaper which was his most recent link with the greater world, Nigel and I took a canoe and paddled over to Cannon Island which was not more than two hundred yards away. We were more than lucky to find Robert Trapp at home, for he spent most of his days hunting alligator a long way up-river. It happened that he had come down again only the week before. He was a Belize Negro, enormously broad and tall, and his shock of kinky hair was white, giving him that deceptive air of venerable respectability which age gives to negroes.

Robert Trapp was willing to hire boats for us and arrange for our expedition to be given its initial momentum. Like the people in Tegucigalpa and La Ceiba, he was intensely suspicious of our motives. He put on an enormous pair of gold-rimmed spectacles to read our credentials which finally convinced him that we were merely mad. It was just possible, he told us, that he would be able to start up-river again himself within the next few days, but of course the demand for alligator skins was not what it used to be . . . .

We made a satisfactory arrangement with him that made the alligator market less important, and agreed to start after two days, during which time we would unload our things from the schooner and he would send for boats and men from settlements of Zambus inland and along the coast. Meanwhile we would go back to the schooner and sail across the lagoon to Brewer's Village, which stands at the mouth of the Tom-Tom

Cut-off. Everything was arranged and settled, and at that moment I think we were convinced that within a week we should be well up in the head-waters of the Patuca. We were wrong.

At four o'clock in the afternoon Carlos started the Diesel and we turned eastward towards the Tom-Tom end of the lagoon. At some time in the past Captain Macdonald had driven a number of stakes into the muddy shallows of the lagoon to mark out the narrow channel, which twisted and turned continually, but his stakes had mostly been washed away or put to more practical uses by the Caribs. Here and there an isolated stick showed above the water, leaning crazily to one side, but since he had originally placed the sticks in pairs, with those to starboard identical with those to port, these were not of much help. All one could tell from them was that four years ago, when Macdonald had last sailed through, the channel had been situated on one side or the other of them. Macdonald, however, seemed full of confidence, and rather resented the suggestion that he could not find his way across. He immediately pooh-poohed the idea that we should unload immediately, and ferry our gear across to Brewer's Village by canoe. A contract was a contract, he declared, and he meant to do for us what he had originally agreed to do. On the strength of this burst of confidence in his navigation he shouted to Carlos to increase speed a little. We ran aground. There was a sickening thud, then the schooner remained quite still, her bows and forefoot held fast in a great bank of sand and mud.

The Caribs and Zambus had by this time gone home, so it was left to us to unstick the schooner as best we could. For a long time we tried driving her forward and then back, alternately running the Diesel full speed ahead and then full speed astern, hoping to widen the cleft in the mud and free the schooner's bows. The only effect of this was to churn up the water all around us and if anything to drive the schooner farther into the bank. We tried shifting weight and we tried running up and down the deck ourselves. Nothing was any good. Night began to fall, so we decided that we might as well stay in the middle of the lagoon as on the far side. The only method of refloating the schooner which we had not tried was going overboard ourselves and digging her out. This was bound to free her, but we only wanted to use it as a last resort since it would be hard, dirty work. But at night even this was out of the question, for the lagoon is thickly populated with alligators, and in the dark no one in the water would be safe from attack. There were also sharks.

So we stayed the night in the middle of Brewer's Lagoon, stuck ignominiously fast on a mud-bank. But it had its advantages : had we been ashore we should have been entertained, doubtless, by the Assistant *Comandante* who lived at Brewer's Village. And here in the middle of the Lagoon it was cooler, and there were no mosquitoes. That was the best night's sleep we were to have for some time to come.

The following morning we were up early, all of us stark naked in the water, hard at work to refloat the

schooner. The mud was soft and slimy underfoot and clammily warm. In places one's feet sank deep down into it. Only Carlos remained on the schooner standing with a rifle on top of the wheelhouse to watch for alligators. It was not at all likely that any would venture near such a commotion, particularly in the daytime, but we thought it as well to take no chances.

We dug for hours at the soft red mud and it seemed that as fast as we moved it from under the schooner's full bows it caved in again from the sides, and she wallowed deeper. We started at the first sign of light, to try and get free before the sun's full power made it impossible to work in the open, and by midday we were no better off than we had been the previous night. We climbed wearily up over the side again and scraped the red mud off ourselves on deck.

We did not know what to do ; we had tried every known way of floating the schooner without result. She had no cargo that we could jettison, and every bit of her ballast was on the outside. Our own equipment was not heavy enough to make an appreciable difference to the schooner's weight.

It began to look as if we should have been wiser to have ferried ourselves along the lagoon in canoes, but this would have been dreadfully slow. An expanse of unprotected water as long and broad as Brewer's can become very rough, and it is no place to be caught in a squall. Had we unloaded our things and taken a number of small boats, we should have had to follow the edge of the lagoon so as to be within easy reach of shore all the way. We had three outboard motors

with us, stowed away in the hold, but not a drop of petrol : that we hoped to get on the river, from the planters' trading station a few miles above the Tom-Tom junction.

In gloomy consultation we sat around the cockpit and stared into the churned water. All the sails in the schooner's scanty locker had been set, in the hope of catching even the lightest airs to help roll us out of the mud. They hung derisively in limp folds.

Suddenly we became conscious of a faint sound, unexpectedly familiar : it was the high-pitched beat of a small outboard motor, from the direction of Brewer's Village. We scanned the distant water anxiously with our glasses. There was only one boat in sight. The Caribs and Zambus, having satisfied their curiosity, were now leaving us strictly to our own devices. Apart from the long canoe with the outboard motor that was chugging towards us, the lagoon was deserted.

We stood and watched the canoe for a very long time before it was near enough for us to make out who was in it. Even the Assistant *Comandante* would be welcome enough, for with a little luck and persuasion he could be sent off again to fetch petrol, and if he used an outboard motor himself it made it probable that he had a petrol store of his own at the village.

But our troubles were far from over : the lagoon seemed anxious to prevent our reaching its eastern end. When the canoe was still a quarter of a mile away we heard the motor splutter for a minute and then roar, and then there was silence. No one said anything.

There was nothing to say. The man in the big canoe started to paddle laboriously towards the shore.

I am not going to bore you with a detailed account of how we refloated the *Perla del Mar* and finally reached Brewers' Village, with the Diesel running and three outboard motors clamped to the schooner's counter to help drive her out of the mud. Let it suffice the reader to know that this was probably the least pleasant and most tedious part of the journey, and that we finally reached Brewer's Village after a further sweltering delay of a day and a half. We paddled a canoe for a great many hours, coming and going with petrol : we worked in the sun, up to our waists in muddy water. We sweated and swore.

Chapter Seven

TOM-TOM CUT-OFF

BREWER'S VILLAGE was called *Pueblo Brus* on our map, which was over sixty years old and had been drawn, with a great deal of imagination, in Spain. The *Segundo-Comandante* was drunk when we arrived and still drunk when we took our leave two days later. He was neither amusing nor aggressive in his cups : he was merely in a condition of profound coma. For all we could tell he might have been lying dead in his blue and white Nicaraguan hammock when we called for his official permission to start upstream. Only the empty *Aguardiente* jars that lay around on the earthen floor gave any hint that his unconsciousness was only temporary. We left him a note.

But if the *Segundo-Comandante* was no help to us he refrained from hindering, and we were fortunate enough to find someone else at Brewer's Village whose aid was to be invaluable.

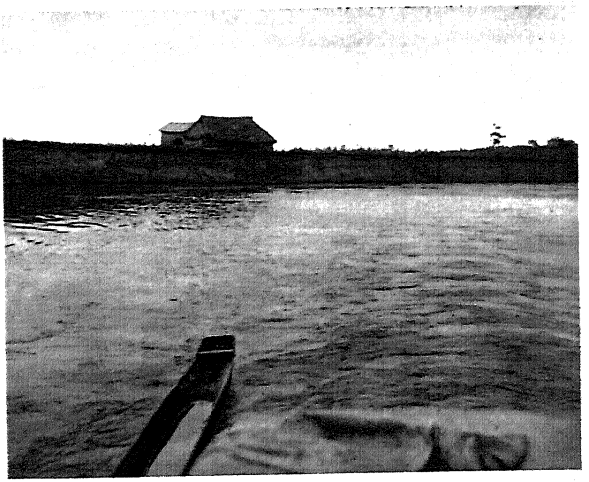
His name was Clayton Cooke. He was an American, a slight sharp-faced man so deeply tanned that he looked like an Indian. He had pale-blue eyes, deep set among tiny criss-cross lines, and when he smiled his eyes disappeared, leaving nothing but a wrinkle-gashed brown patchwork. He did not tell us why he lived on the Lagoon, the only white man for many miles, and we

never asked him. At any rate he liked it, for I have rarely seen anyone so obviously happy.

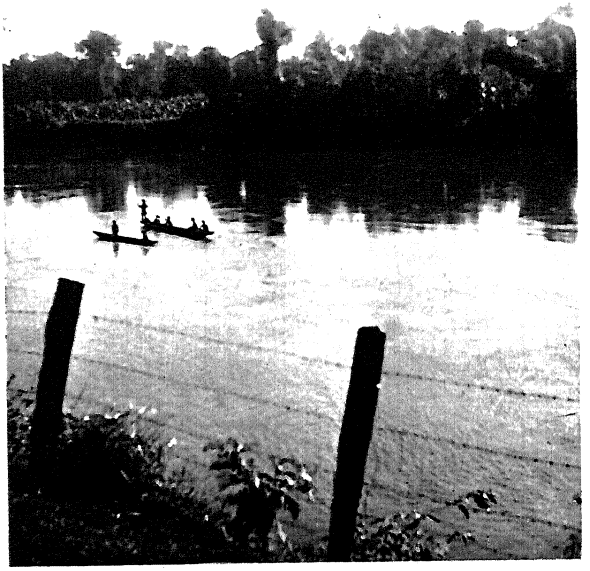
We saw him first on the beach as the schooner drew in towards shore. He wore a pair of grey shorts and a wide-brimmed straw hat and nothing else. As the anchor splashed into the water he raised a hand listlessly in the tropical gesture of greeting that is actually indicative of some enthusiasm. There was a week's growth of beard on his chin.

We went with him to his hut which stood on a small swampy island near the mouth of the Tom-Tom. He showed it to us with pride : he had built it, from driftwood and petrol tins and palm leaves, entirely alone. Around the house stood a few acres of bananas and a small crop of the red native beans called *frijoles*. But, as he told us, we hadn't seen anything yet. We made our way through the hut to the back, which faced the jungle. On a clear patch of soil that must have taken him years of labour to wrest from the sea and sand and prolific tropical shrub, were orchids, set neatly in orderly rows. They were the most beautiful flowers I have ever seen in any country, and they struck me so in tropical America where orchids are a weed and grow wild. The sudden sight of that mass of voluptuous colour, standing grotesquely in orderly lines, is the one moment of our time in the Lagoon which stands out most clearly in my mind. Clayton Cooke stood looking out over them and told us something of his passion for orchids. We began to understand part of his reason for living a hermit life on the Lagoon.

Cooke did everything for us. With Robert Trapp,



Zambu House near Brewers Lagoon



TOM-TOM CUT-OFF

our Belize Negro from Cannon Island, he helped us buy canoes and such extra provisions as would be of any use. He sold us gallons of petrol from his own store : (he had been the man in the long canoe with the outboard motor who had started out towards us across the Lagoon). We found out a great deal of valuable information about the currents on the Patuca, and he taught us a few words of Zambu dialect to help us with the boys. We slept in hammocks in his house until we were finally ready to start up the Tom-Tom Cut-off.

On what must have been the hottest day in August we stood beside Cooke's house, ready to make upstream. Even at eight o'clock in the morning the sun was fierce, and the air hazy with heat. The sky was cloudless, a clear blue broken only by the buzzards which hover eternally overhead.

There were five boats, three of which were of the type called '*pipantos*' rather like punts, but considerably longer, and the other two dugout canoes or '*cayukas*.' The '*pipantos*' we loaded with our equipment and the provisions ; the guns and ammunition were placed in the '*cayukas*' with us. Nigel took one and I the other. Robert Trapp, beaming benevolently over gold-rimmed spectacles, took the lead in the first *pipanto* with another Negro, and the other *pipantos* were each manned by two boys. There was a great deal of noise and a last frenzied check to make sure that everything necessary had been packed in the boats. Finally we were off, paddling and poling out into the stream.

Clayton Cooke waved a long farewell to us until we had rounded the bend.

It is no easy matter to arrange the commissariat of an expedition of unknown composition for an indefinite time in unknown territory. We were faced with a number of awkward details of staff work owing to the fact that we knew so little of what we were to find : what food would be available, how many mouths we should have to feed, and how far we would be able to go. Most of the questions that faced us were left, like practically all the details of the expedition, inefficiently to chance. We were incredibly optimistic and solved all problems by merely telling each other, with convincing frequency, that everything would turn out right when the time came. And for the most part it did.

The backbone of our food was starch, contrary to all the best principles of Doctor Hay. We had as many large sacks as could be carried of rice and native beans, because these are durable and are locally the cheapest food there is. Besides this there was an enormous quantity of flour, most of which was to fall overboard long before it could be put to any practical use. Apart from this we took practically nothing, except such necessaries as salt, lard and baking powder. All the odd corners in the boats were filled with tins of American food, which we originally intended to keep and eat sparingly as a change from the perpetual rice and beans, but which in fact were all eaten almost immediately. Fruit and meat we hoped to get as we went, but in one

of the canoes we included a large supply of limes to tide us over such time as we should not be able to get fruit.

It took us three days to reach the Patuca junction from Brewer's Lagoon, three days of uneventful and fairly easy travel. The Tom-Tom is wide and deep, and has nothing like the speed of the Patuca. We paddled along without hurrying, lingering through the last fringes of civilization. Here and there along the banks were huts, occupied by Indians who had wandered away from their territories, or by occasional stray Caribs and Negroes like Robert Trapp. The country around the Tom-Tom is fertile and can support a great many people in lazy luxury. Bananas grow very well, and there is always a supply of coconuts ; fresh-water fish can be harpooned in the river, and fat wild turkeys provide good meat.

There are also a few straggling banana plantations on the Cut-off, run by persistent and enterprising Germans. It is remarkable that throughout the tropics the last drop of blood is squeezed not by the English or the Americans, but by Germans ; they plant fruit in places condemned by others as impossible, and they live in apparent happiness in swamps and fever jungles deserted even by the Indians. The planters on the Tom-Tom have a hard life and a very unprofitable one. Their crops are menaced, every rainy season, by the great river. It is unusual for a year to pass without serious floods. When the water has subsided and the fruit is again full on the trees, the hurricane season

begins and their trees are blown down, often carried bodily away in a muddy torrent. And as an additional danger, the Nicaraguan frontier is menacingly close and always provides the probability of fighting. Bandits from all over South America and the tropics take refuge in the Patuca country, and make their headquarters along the conveniently vague frontier.

The growing of the crops, however, is not the most difficult of the problems which face the planter. Once the fruit is ready for cutting, it must be shipped to the Atlantic ports for sale : and since bananas, unlike citrus fruit, continue to ripen long after cutting, the transport must be organized with great efficiency to ensure that the fruit reaches its market at the correct stage in its development. Load after load is wasted, dumped into the river as useless because a raft ran aground and delayed shipment for half a day, or because a schooner was late at the Patuca Bar.

But when things go well the banana business can be profitable enough. A stem costs between sixpence and ninepence to grow, and in La Ceiba it is sold to the fruit companies for about half a crown, which leaves a considerable margin to cover the cost of shipping. But it very rarely happens that it is enough to cover the ravages of hurricanes, floods and fever.

We called at several farms on the way up the Cut-off, leaving letters that had lain waiting for weeks at the Lagoon. The Germans were pathetically eager for news from the outside world. Some of them had not left their farms for eighteen months, for there had recently been a bad blow-down and all their time was

taken up in replanting. They lived crudely, in native huts reinforced with petrol tins and oil drums and strongly surrounded by barbed wire. Each settlement had a store of useful or attractive articles which were used instead of currency to pay the local casual labour —mirrors, scent, knives and so on. They had no luxuries and few comforts. Only one of the planters had a wireless.

We wasted too much time among the planters, but they were desperately eager for news and conversation and we found it difficult to leave.

In the evening of the third day after leaving the Lagoon we reached the great fork where the Patuca joins the Tom-Tom. Both streams were wide and fast, and the running together of the waters had widened the banks to such an extent that there was almost a lake at the junction. In the centre were the tops of rocks which had been driven down by the floods and were now embedded in the sand. A sort of whirlpool was formed by the currents, so that we had to keep our boats close to the bank to avoid the rocks.

Since it was late and the mosquitoes would soon be out, we decided to camp at the junction for the night rather than risk finding a suitable pitch higher up on the Patuca. We ran the boats ashore on a sand-bank.

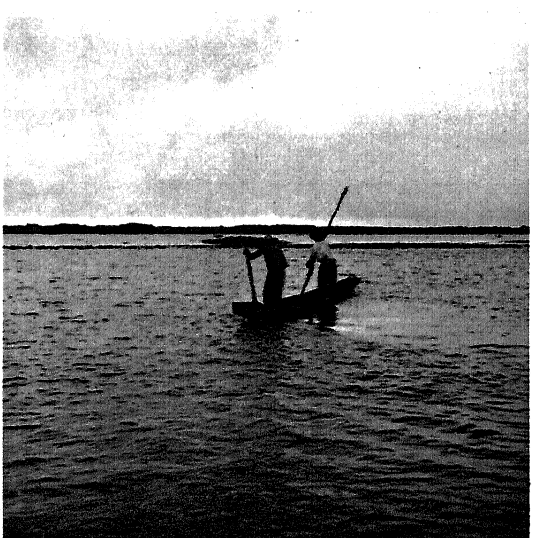
The technique of sleeping in Mosquitia is involved. The country is named with singular accuracy. By six o'clock one must be protected, by some means or other, from the swarms of mosquitoes that appear suddenly

from nowhere. As dusk falls, a high-pitched humming rises faintly : for a few minutes it quavers and grows louder, then the mosquitoes are upon you, filling the air and covering every inch of exposed skin in tormenting swarms. Of all the equipment we had with us, our mosquito-nets were the most valuable and were the only things we could not have done without. We rigged them double, slung between trees, with waterproof groundsheets on the sand.

But even the best mosquito-nets are far from infallible, and on a number of occasions we were woken up in the pitch black of the tropical night to find that feet were protruding under the nets, holding them invitingly open. And every night before going to sleep there was a furious scramble inside the nets as we chased the mosquitoes that were already inside. Sleeping under a net is not on the whole pleasant : but there was nothing else for it. We made tentative attempts at sleep without them, after smearing ourselves with various commercial preparations, falsely claimed to be mosquito-proof, but quickly lost hope of success.

Later on, when we were well up the Patuca, we developed a better plan for night camps. A line was strung across the river from tree to tree, and we fixed the boats to it so that they floated through the night in the middle of the river. This was cooler than the shore, and in addition we avoided the possibility of snakes and insects. And the mosquitoes seemed slightly less persistent. The only thing that disturbed us was the occasional bumping of inquisitive alligators. We used to practise shooting, with revolvers, at the pairs

Lagoon Zambus



BREWERS LAGOON

of eyes that slid quietly over the water. We rarely hit them.

The Patuca junction is desolate and remote. There is not the faintest sign of human habitation, for even the Indians have been driven away by the regular floods. Thick vegetation reaches down to the sand-banks along the water, impenetrable and black. It is one of those places, which can be found all over the civilized and uncivilized world, which are strangely and unreasonably depressing. It struck us vividly as the last landmark of 'civilization,' and the first bourne of unknown lands.

When we left the Tom-Tom and found ourselves in the Patuca, our progress became slower and a number of difficulties arose annoyingly to hinder us. The Patuca runs faster than the Cut-off, for it is very shallow and rocky. Robert Trapp and the Zambu boys poled the *pipantos* while Nigel and I paddled in the *cayukas*. We travelled on endlessly, for days a journey unbroken by the sight of anything but the river and the jungle. The heat grew intolerable, and we contrived awnings over the boats from tarpaulins and canvas. Most of our serious travel we accomplished in early morning and late afternoon, sleeping through the scorching middle day.

There was so little to do in those first days on the river that we took refuge in the disciplined routine of our lives. With the apparent stupidity of an army we delighted in making a great fuss over the smallest details of equipment. The Zambus did their work in silence, sullen and Indian.

During the daytime we sat continually with guns across our knees, waiting for the chance of a shot at wild turkey or Muscovia ducks. When they appeared we shot them easily enough, for they were unaccustomed to men and not afraid. They were cooked over a primus, a welcome relief from rice and beans.

Usually we took our meals without stopping. One of the *pipantos* had for some reason become the kitchen, possibly because one of the Zambu boys in it, called *M'Tsu*, had the best claims to the position of chef. The other boats drew alongside in turn and collected their lunch.

Those days were boring. There was nothing to see, the heat was intolerable, and we slugged along at what seemed a snail's pace. The only diversion was provided by running aground, which happened with regularity to all the boats in turn. We vented our bad temper on alligators and vultures, wasting valuable ammunition in impossible shots.

On the fifth night away from the junction we met with misfortune which might easily have been calamity. In the late afternoon we had drawn up as usual, strung our line across the Patuca from bank to bank, and settled down in the boats for the night. There was no moon and as soon as the quick tropical night fell it became impossible to see a yard. We were on a bend of the river in a narrow and fast-running reach. The *pipantos* were fastened close to the shore-line, and the *cayukas* in which Nigel and I slept lay astern, some ten or twelve feet downstream.

It must have been well after midnight that it happened. I awoke in a tearing crash ; a blinding light shone at me and I felt my *cayuka* lifted by the current and carried clumsily broadside on down-river. One is not at one's best to deal with an emergency when rudely woken up in a sweltering night and a very narrow canoe. I grappled fiercely with my double mosquito-nets, brought them down on top of me and tore my way through, for some reason not upsetting the canoe. From the shrieks it seemed that the whole party was in chaos. The Zambus, shaken out of impassivity, were in full tongue. Nigel was making the night horrid with oaths. I gave up guessing what had happened and concentrated on getting the *cayuka's* head to the current. My torch was nowhere to be found and the aforesaid blinding light which had appeared immediately after the accident had disappeared again. I paddled cautiously upstream towards the confusion, making for what I hoped was the middle of the river. It was too dark to see the other boats or the bank. An incongruous voice broke thickly through the night, '*Verflucht noch einmal!*'

I had no time to consider the import of this remark before the light flashed on again, and the whole catastrophe was floodlit and explained. In the middle of the river was a flat-boat, a sort of elongated tug with a small wheel-house amidships. Beside the wheel-house stood a tall fair-haired man in blue dungarees, obviously as surprised as he was cross. Clinging to the side of his barge were Nigel's *cayuka* half-full of water, and two *pipantos*. Robert Trapp was there, his white

curls and gold-rimmed spectacles catching the light and standing out against his startled ebony-black face. A vague number of Zambus gesticulated and shrieked noisily in the boats. But where was the third *pipanto*? As the German turned his light we saw it downstream, drifting swiftly with the current, bottom-up. There was no sign of the two boys who had been in it, and as we watched it was carried out of sight, twisting and turning until it rounded the bend. We made fast all the boats to the flat-boat and clambered aboard.

It was obvious enough what had happened: although we had been told that the German planters from up-river would not journey to the Lagoon for several weeks yet, they had obviously changed their minds and run foul of the line we had put across the river. The flat-boat had rammed *M'Tsu's* canoe, throwing him and his companion into the river and eradicating our kitchen. We were a little worried about the two Zambus, for although they could swim like fish they had been taken very much by surprise and alligators were plentiful and hungry at night. We took our guns and blazed them off, hoping to frighten the alligators away, for alligators are timid and not particularly dangerous unless they know that they have their victims at their mercy.

Later on it became evident that the accident was to prove exceedingly awkward for us. *M'Tsu* and his friend, who had safely reached shore, were ferried back to us intact, chattering and dripping. But our big primus was gone, the flour was all at the bottom of the river, and the drums of petrol we had bought at Brewer's

Lagoon had disappeared irretrievably downstream. When the German had recovered from his shock he was volubly apologetic.

But the loss of stove and provisions was not the only misfortune which followed upon the collision. *M'Tsu* and his friend had lost faith in the expedition and loudly declared their intention of returning at once to the Lagoon. What could happen once, they argued, could happen twice : and they had no desire to be drowned or eaten alive by alligators. They poured Zambu scorn upon our inefficiency.

There was nothing for it but to let them go, although they would have been very useful later on. As the German started his engine they stayed aboard and went downstream with him. Not until daylight did we discover the loss of a pair of binoculars, two torches, and about a hundred rounds of revolver ammunition from the other boats.

Above us now there lay two more white settlements before we finally reached the wild Indian territories. There was a small German plantation, owned by the fair-haired man in the flat-boat, and farther on another banana farm run by an American planter to whom we had letters of introduction. Exactly a week after leaving the Lagoon we reached his hut at *Brauvila* creek.

We spent two days and nights with the planter, resting and reorganizing, and we bought food and petrol from him to replace what had been lost. Unfortunately he had no spare stove to give us, so we had to make the best of the two small primuses.

He lived an odd life, alone for a year or eighteen months at a time, save for the company of Indians and Zambus who worked for him. His house was surrounded like a machine-gun emplacement by great barbed-wire entanglements designed to discourage jaguars, tiger-cats and human marauders. On a shelf inside the door lay two repeating shot-guns, sawn off short and loaded with buck-shot.

Two days we wasted at Brauvila, talking and making plans with the planter. He had never gone more than five or six miles upstream from his camp, and could give us little advice. Like the planters on the Cut-off he was desperately anxious for news from the outside world, and wanted us to stay longer. We played interminable games of cards with a greasy pack, gambling for revolver ammunition by candlelight.

When we started upstream again we broke out the two outboard motors and clamped them to the *pipantos*. Nigel and I took charge of one each and the *cayukas* were towed astern. In front of each *pipanto* lay a Zambu boy, flat on his front, clearing the bows of sticks and driftwood that might foul the propellers.

The next few days were uneventful and identical. The only break in our laborious progress was the intermittent misbehaviour of the motors. There were three troubles which recurred and which seemed incurable. Of these the most frequent was a merely temperamental stopping, with no apparent mechanical reason. One motor or the other would splutter and cough, then suddenly die away. Upon examination of plugs, feed and

points nothing would appear out of order ; but presently, after much spinning of the infuriating piece of string provided to set the motor in motion, it would start up again and run perfectly for hours. I have since been told that all outboards do it. The second trouble was more serious and in fact led, several weeks later, to our jettisoning both motors. The propeller bearings, running at full speed and a few inches above a sandy bottom, continually absorbed sand in spite of elaborate filters. The third trouble was also luckily infrequent : it happened only when whoever was steering failed to lift the engine over rocky patches. The propeller of an outboard motor is fixed to its shaft by a plug of soft metal called a shear-pin, designed to give way if the propeller hits anything under water. This arrangement is admirable in that it prevents damage to the motor : but it means that the propeller sinks like a stone to the bottom of the water. And in an expedition that carries only one spare propeller this is just as bad as losing the whole motor. The first time that it happened I dived overboard at once and was lucky enough to find the propeller ; but less than half an hour later Nigel ran over a shallow patch and lost his irretrievably, since we were among rocks and in no position to stop. He took a line from my stern and I towed him until that night, when we fixed the spare propeller.

Now that we were above all the plantations there was no chance of another midnight collision, and we slept as before in midstream. We ate rice and beans, cooking them in as many fantastic ways as we could. Occa-

sionally one of us potted a turkey, and for one enormous meal there was fresh meat.

The river grew monotonous as we chugged upstream through sweltering dull days. It was eternally the same ; long rocky bends, sand-banks, and the thick black jungle on either side. The heat grew worse. Since we had long passed the last landmarks, we were making for no definite objective, and it seemed that we were getting nowhere. The river flowed shallow and treacherous, always beating us back. We fought on wearily.

Chapter Eight

PATUCA

THE Patuca, like another far-better-known river, runs deep and wide. But it is treacherous, alternating deep reaches with patches of rocks and great banks of red mud. At all times of the year the water is thick and dirty and not at all transparent, the heavy colour of raw umber. It sweeps on swiftly through the jungle and savanna land in long bends fringed with yellow sand. In places there are clearings along the bank, but for most of its length the jungle grows dense and dark to the water's edge. It is the only channel through miles of tropical forests, and an air of quiet mystery lingers along its shaded banks. The noise of our troublesome outboards carried for miles over the water and sent parrots and cranes and tropical birds we did not know high into the sky. Ashore there was an incessant chatter of monkeys. Occasionally we could see them swinging from tree to tree, white-faced baboons and ring-tails, as they followed us up the river.

During those days we kept our eyes constantly on the banks, eagerly watching for signs of life. There was little chance of surprising wild tribes, for they were well warned by the noise we made ; but we were already in the Zambu territory and the sites of their winter villages should be visible.

For a week and two days we struggled on uneventfully. The course taken by the river is in length nearly double the distance as the crow flies, but cutting across country to eliminate the bends was out of the question. The jungle was infernally thick and we had no map to show which way the Patuca curved. The river began to grow shallower and daily we noticed that the banks were closer to us. The sand and rocks became more troublesome, and our progress grew slower.

On the ninth day after leaving Brauvila creek we first saw signs of life. A patch of tall grass on the left bank, standing hemmed in by the forest on three sides, had been beaten down and we could see the new grass growing through the old. We beached the boats on the sand and went ashore to examine the clearing.

But if we had hoped to find a Zambu settlement we were to be disappointed, for there was no more than the trace of a former occupation. A little patch of flattened earth, a few broken branches, a pile of dead leaves ; this was all we found to show that the country was alive. During the winter months the Zambus flock to the river, building grass huts and earthen ovens which are abandoned again in the rainy season. At this time of year, in the full heat of summer, most of their villages would be high up in the hills that lay hidden on either side of the river. We did not hope for much in the lowlands. But the sight of that clearing, many miles from the nearest settlement of the lower river, encouraged us immensely and the river lost its tedium. We were in the Indian territories.

For another week we made lazily upstream, taking our time and watching the river banks. From time to time we came upon more clearings that showed where Zambu camps had stood, but still there was no sign of human life. Evidently the tribes were up-country, and such stragglers as might have remained were frightened away by the strange roar of our motors. It was not our aim to find the tribes only of this part of the Patuca, so we did not bother to stop the outboards to investigate. We wanted to reach the highest possible point in the river, pitch our camp, and from there make excursions into the hills.

Now that we had reached the headwaters of the river we began to make plans for a return journey by a different route. To drift back along the Patuca would be easy enough but monotonous, and we wanted to see something of the country that lay between the Patuca and Caratasca Lagoon, which was said to be thickly populated with wild tribes. Some miles above Brau-vila we had paddled past a creek which led off to the south-west, and which at the time we had thought might lead off as far as the Guarunta or one of the other rivers which drain the swamp-lands south of the Patuca into Caratasca Lagoon. (See Map, page 34.) But if on our return we decided to try this, we should not have enough provisions ; making across country would mean a journey of many days, and might entail a long portage. It was too much to hope that the creek would lead straight into the Guarunta. Accordingly we decided to send Robert Trapp back to the Tom-Tom to buy more rice and beans and to wait for us at

Brauvila. We took the outboard off his *pipanto* and fixed it alongside the other motor on ours, and the two *cayukas* we towed. Robert turned his *pipanto*, the current took it broadside on for a moment, then he disappeared downstream around the bend, drifting far more quickly with the current than we had been able to travel upstream with the motors.

We now had three boats, and there were three of us—Nigel and myself and a half-bred Zambu called Tomás. We sat in the *pipanto*, for it took all our energy to keep the motors going, and Tomás sat in front clearing the bows of driftwood and watching for submerged rocks.

On the ninth day one of the *cayukas* split in two, and we were only just able to rescue its contents before it sank and we had to cut it adrift. Some time during the same night the other *cayuka* disappeared and so did Tomás. All we knew was that when we woke up in the faint light of dawn and threaded our way out of our mosquito-bars, Tomás and the boat had gone. We never found out what became of him : nothing had been heard of him in Brewer's Lagoon when we returned some five weeks later, and none of the planters had seen a *cayuka* drifting downstream. Probably he reached his own tribe, and with the *cayuka* for a peace-offering was reinstated.

We were alone with our one remaining boat.

It was something of a relief to be entirely on our own. As we had penetrated farther into the Zambu territory, our own boys had grown increasingly nervous and were

obviously disinclined to go on. Tomás had told us, in his rare articulate moments, that the tribes were very timid and peaceful, and that Nigel and I ran no risks in paddling through their lands ; but for himself, he thought, things were different. A Zambu who deserts his tribe for the coast settlements is considered wicked and lacking in pride, and if he were caught by families that knew him there would follow a certain amount of unpleasantness. Exactly what would have happened we could not find out : but he insisted that it was *Muy Mal.* On the way up we had pointed out fairly frequently that he should have thought of things like that before, and that we were in no position to engineer his return to the Lagoon until we were ready to come back ourselves. Robert Trapp, being a Belize Negro, had no sympathy with Tomás, and disciplined him firmly, which Nigel and I were apparently unable to do.

And now we were alone : the work we had to do was doubled, but there were less mouths to feed and we were glad to rid ourselves of responsibility for the Zambus. There is nothing in any country more infuriating than the half-breed's stupidity, and Tomás in particular had frequently come very near to being murdered. One's temper is inclined to be short after several weeks of rice and beans and mosquito bites.

As the river narrowed the jungle grew less dense, and the patches of savanna land appeared more frequently. We watched the banks intently.

It is hard enough to put down on paper anything that expresses the feeling of those weeks on the Patuca. We both kept diaries, and at the risk of being a bore I

am going to quote from mine. We wrote laboriously in the stuffy evenings, with broken pencils on damp sheets of paper.

Thursday. Only one motor all morning. I dismantle the other one while Nigel works at his map of the river, which seems to cause him considerable annoyance. Wherever he starts on his sheet of paper, the river manages to curve in such a way that it goes over the edge. Sand-flies very thick again. We swat them continually, but the handfuls we kill make very little difference. At about midday a turkey flew over suddenly and I missed it badly with a twelve-bore, having my lap covered with the inner workings of the outboard. A little later another one appeared and Nigel potted it without difficulty. In the afternoon both motors run again, five whole hours without a sign of trouble. Very few rocks, and we make good time. Unbroken night in the middle of the river.

Friday. We decide to make an early start, which is always fatal. Neither motor shows any sign of interest in the expedition until nearly half-past seven, when much of the best part of the cool morning has been wasted. However good a mechanic one may be, outboards are temperamental and obey no mechanical laws. The only thing to do is to take them apart carefully and put them together again in exactly the same way, which usually sets them off at once. They are dirty things at the best of times and make a disgusting row. We begin to dislike them intensely as the days go on. At this stage in the journey we both begin to feel

a strange sensation of unreality. The river unfolds with such steady and unbroken regularity that we find it hard to remember the date, and how long we have been going. When the Zambus were still with us it was different, and their presence kept us constantly occupied in telling them what to do and in stopping them from doing whatever they were doing. There was little chance of forgetting, with Robert Trapp and Tomás, that we were very far away from home ; but now that Nigel and I are alone and have seen only each other for nearly two weeks, the river begins to look very ordinary and we can imagine, with a little effort, that we are punting up the Thames in a rather hot summer.

Saturday. At ten o'clock a little clearing on the left bank, and a few broken tree-stumps. On the sand in front of it lay two alligators sleeping in the sun. I took a shot at one with a revolver from about fifteen yards, quite without effect, and they both slid slyly into the river and disappeared. Whether I missed or whether the bullet bounced off I do not know. The alligator is wonderfully armoured, and at anything more than point-blank range you have to hit him at right angles or the shot bounces off. All the alligators we come across are rather timid in the daytime and we can see them wallowing off the mud into the water all along the river as the noise of the outboards disturbs them.

The clearing was disappointing, but it serves like the first one we saw to show that we are on the right track, and that the Patuca country is still populated. Beyond the flattened earth and broken branches there is nothing. Evidently no one had been here for some

months, for the undergrowth had sprung up considerably and was undisturbed.

In the late afternoon we ran aground. It was entirely our fault, as we were talking and paying no attention to the river. There was no danger of being unable to refloat the *pipanto*, as a strong current had been against us and we had had to go fairly slowly, but we were afraid that the boat's bottom might be damaged. As it was late we pulled in to shore to examine it and spend the night.

Sunday. Ran aground twice, but the boat seems to be still sound. It is incredibly hot, one of the hottest days we have had, and we are both bad-tempered. As a last straw the propeller on the left-hand motor struck a rock just before lunch-time, the shear-pin gave way and the propeller disappeared. As we had already lost the spare one this was serious, so we made fast to the right bank and waded out to look for it. As luck would have it most of the river at this point was fairly deep, and we were up to our chests. The water was completely opaque, red and muddy. After about five hours' search Nigel found the propeller twenty-five yards downstream, half-buried in the sand. We went ashore and spent the rest of the day hammering in a new pin as best we could.

I repeat that it is impossible, by anything I write now, for me to give the reader an idea of those long days and weeks in which we worked our way up the Patuca. But for the heat and the mosquitoes it would have been quite pleasant: but in barring those two

factors one eliminates the two most important essentials of the river. Every move we made was governed by the thought of avoiding them, and unfortunately precautions prejudicial to the one favoured the other. There is nothing that makes night stuffy more effectively than a fine-mesh mosquito-net, and in the sweltering daytime we were forced to wear long clothes to protect ourselves from bites. Whether we preferred heat or mosquitoes was an eternal question which we continually tried to solve by compromise. During the daytime we amused ourselves by abortive attempts at mapping the course of the river, but beyond proving that all the existing maps were wrong we achieved nothing of geographical importance. In the early days we had wasted round after round of ammunition in shooting at cranes, alligators and buzzards, but now that we were alone with only one boat we grew more careful of our supplies.

It was an odd collection of equipment that we took with us. The loss of the other boats had completely disorganized our careful staff-work, so that we were left with a number of comparative luxuries at the expense of things more important. We had two primuses and several small drums of petrol : an enormous quantity of beans, rice and flour ; several bags of raw tobacco leaf, to be given to the Indians, and salt for the same purpose. These things were necessaries and were the integral parts of our expedition ; but they contrasted wildly with some of the other odds and ends in the *pipanto*. When we left Tegucigalpa and again before we sailed from La Ceiba various people had given us

presents ostensibly for use on the journey, an improbable assortment of impractical luxuries. In a hermetically sealed case were fifty Coronas, a connecting link with the advantages of civilization, and with them, carefully preserved in a wicker basket, was a bottle of very old brandy from the cellars of His Majesty's Legation. We decided not to touch them till we reached the highest point of the Patuca. In addition to all this we had cameras, binoculars and compasses, and Nigel who is mildly insane on the subject of navigation had a sextant, with which he had many hours of quiet fun in spite of being unable to see a horizon. But the oddest piece of equipment was the flute. It was a large silver flute, which was pressed upon Nigel before he left England by an elderly gentleman of his acquaintance. Whether he had misunderstood our destination or whether he thought that a flute was an ideal toy to keep us amused when we got tired of the Patuca, we never knew. At any rate Nigel had brought the flute, and every time we made lists of what we would take when we finally reached the river, the flute was unhesitatingly dismissed. But by some means or other it was still with us in La Ceiba, then on the schooner, then in Brewer's Lagoon, finally now high up on the Patuca. It lay silently in its velvet-lined case, a silver flute which neither of us could play, while we were lacking spark-plugs and quinine and ammunition. And I am ashamed to say that when we returned to La Ceiba many weeks later neither of us could play a recognizable tune on it.

In the cool dawn of one early morning we rounded a

long bend and found a small Zambu village standing along the water's edge. Instinctively I cut out both motors, but too late : the seven huts were deserted.

We had camped the night before not more than a quarter of a mile downstream, and the wind had been blowing up-river. Evidently the Zambus had fled. The huts were new, fresh ashes lay strewn on the ground, and the undergrowth had been recently cut away. We went ashore and found tracks leading off at right angles to the course of the river, back into the hills. But it was obviously useless to follow, so we unshipped the outboards and stowed them away inside the boat, resigning ourselves to paddling from that day on. It was hot, slow work, but we did not want to frighten the tribes higher up the river.

The Zambus are one tribe of the race of Indians known originally as Misskito Indians, now by corruption (and with the accuracy of coincidence) called Mosquito Indians. The history of the Mosquito Coast is worth noticing briefly.

In 1630 the Earl of Warwick formed a company which occupied two small cays a little way south of Cape Gracias à Dios, established friendly relations with the Indians, and did a certain amount of trade with them in mahogany and minerals. This, as far as anyone knows, was the first white settlement in Mosquitia, and as a result of its success Great Britain in 1655 claimed a protectorate over the Indians which lasted until as late as 1850. But this protectorate was unsuccessful and provocative, for it led to continual

disputes with the United States, Spain, and the other republics of Central America ; chiefly owing to the fear that Great Britain would somehow obtain a privileged position in the proposed inter-oceanic canal. During these years the Coast was a bone of considerable contention between Great Britain and the United States, and in 1848 an event occurred which narrowly escaped leading them to war. The Indians rose and seized the town of San Juan del Norte, having been incited and abetted by the more enterprising British settler. In 1850 the danger of Anglo-American conflict was avoided by the Clayton-Bulwer treaty in which both countries pledged themselves not to fortify or occupy any part of Central America. Nine years later Great Britain ceded her protectorate over the Mosquito Coast and the Bay Islands, an action which apparently led to immediate dissatisfaction among the Indians, and in 1860 the Treaty of Managua transferred the suzerainty of the whole Caribbean coast from Cape Gracias à Dios to San Juan del Norte to the republic of Nicaragua, granting autonomy only to the Indians in the proscribed Mosquito reserve.

This new state of affairs was accepted by Black Ralph, a half-educated Zambu who was King of the Misskito Indians, and his apparently presumptuous stipulation that the Nicaraguan Government should pay him an annual fee of £1,000 was also accepted without demur. But in 1864 Black Ralph died, and Nicaragua refused to recognize his successor ; whereupon the Indians refused to recognize the authority of Nicaragua, and a guerilla warfare was started which

lasted until 1880, when the dispute was by mutual consent submitted for decision to the Emperor of Austria. Why the Austrian Emperor was chosen as arbitrator I do not know: but he supported the Indians and upheld their right to autonomy, which was accordingly exercised until 1894 when they voluntarily surrendered it and the Mosquito reserve became the province of Zelaya in the republic of Nicaragua.

Since those days little has happened. The Honduran frontier has moved south to the River Wanks, so that much of the reserve that was once in Nicaragua is now part of Honduras: but the Indians remain in the same condition as they were a hundred and fifty years ago. The territory is no more explored, the Zambus are considerably less educated. At best it was only the few who lived along the Caribbean that came into contact with the English influence; and now the distorted traces of that influence have been grafted into the religion and tradition of the Indians till it has become a wild mixed ideology including Black Magic, Voodoo and all the extravagances of primitive superstition. The seeds of Christianity planted in early days by enterprising but ineffective missionaries have produced varied fruits which would probably surprise them very much.

The Zambus are the Indians who live nearest to the Coast. They are the darkest in colour, for during the last century the whole of the Caribbean seaboard was flooded with the Negro blood of escaped slaves, as prolific as they were numerous. The result is that the Zambus are very dark, almost as black as the Caribs;

but their Indian blood has preserved their typical features and it is only the colour that has been much altered. As one works farther back into the territories, the influence of Negro blood diminishes and the Indian grows stronger, till one reaches the Colón mountains where the Vicentino tribes are quite pale but high-cheeked and stolidly Indian. It is noticeable that as the Negro strain disappears the people become smaller in stature. Nowhere, away from the Coast, is either English or Spanish spoken. The tribes have their own dialects which resemble neither the one nor the other.

That was the sum of our knowledge of Mosquitia when we reached the upper waters of the Patuca. We had studied the evasive and contradictory scraps of information contained in reference books and we had obtained all the available maps. That was all there was to know.

Chapter Nine

M'TSAMU

THE Zambu greeting is '*Naksaa.*' But the word is also used, with the verbal economy of primitive people, to signify compliance, pleasure, or agreement. You say '*Naksaa*' several times upon meeting a Zambu, and you say it when you take your leave; and you repeat the word during any lulls in the conversation to show that you are still in a friendly and contented state of mind. It is a universal expression of satisfaction.

When we paddled round a long bend in the river to find a bevy of Zambu women in the water we were as surprised as they. They watched us stolidly from black eyes, standing startled and naked. There was nothing for it but to shout '*Naksaa*' a great many times with varying inflection, to convince them that we meant well. But unlike the tribes we had driven from the earlier reaches of the river with the terrifying roar of our outboard motors, these Zambus were unafraid. After the first few moments of startled scrutiny, a great mirth seemed to strike them and they were convulsed with paroxysms of raucous laughter. They shrieked and giggled, they slapped each other's wet backs, they were completely doubled up with Indian glee, but apparently it never occurred to them to be afraid. We

stood in our boat looking rather foolish. This was not at all the reception we had expected. During the last few weeks we had continually pictured to ourselves the first moment of encounter with the Zambus ; we wondered how difficult it would be to overcome their timidity, and whether they would attribute supernatural powers to us. Now that the moment had actually arrived it became apparent that the only part of the expedition which inspired awe was the noise of the outboard motors. We clambered ashore, drew the boat up on the sand, and as a sort of preliminary peace-offering handed out some legs and wings of turkey that we had left from lunch. These were very well received, and for a few minutes distracted all attention from ourselves.

But when the women led us back to their village and the men, in a clearing standing slightly back from the river bank, things were very different. We were objects of suspicion and alarm. We stood in the middle of the clearing while a conclave was held. The general opinion of the men seemed to be that the women had acted rashly in bringing us ashore and that they were treating the affair with undue levity. No attention was paid to us at all, and we were rather reminded of those charming terminal functions at Oxford in which one is impersonally and often rudely discussed by the body of one's tutors, who ignore one and use only the third person.

Before long the whole of the village had assembled in an inquisitive chattering ring around us, and the elderly Zambu who took the chief part in reproving

Kirkonnell and Osgood (Bay Islanders)

Zambus polinga pipanto in Brewers Lagoon

the women began to realize that the proprieties of hospitality had not yet been observed. He waved his arms and shouted at the gaping Zambus. The collection was dispersed, but they lingered in the background and in the doorways of their huts to watch us.

The old man motioned to us to follow him and led the way to a large hut which was his own.

Nigel and I were very much encouraged. We had successfully made our way into the middle of a Zambu village without alarming the Indians, and as far as one could tell this was completely untouched ground. On the way to the hut we saw no single sign of civilization or white influence. But once inside the hut we were to be disillusioned. The scales fell suddenly from our eyes. On the far wall, occupying a place of dignity and importance, was the red and green legend ' Lucky Strike ' : and on one of the side walls this was matched by a more modest sign, ' Coca-Cola.' The old man (who later introduced himself as *M'tsamu*, or a name most closely approximated by those letters) grinned toothily at us and pointed to the signs. We hoped for an explanation from him : but he contented himself with a reverent murmur of ' *Naksaa, naksaa.*'

Exactly how those two signs came to be in the Zambu village I do not know, and although we made every effort to find out, no clues appeared. When we offered the Zambus cigarettes, they were surprised and evidently had never seen such things before. Certainly they were not familiar with tobacco in that form. Finally we decided that the signs, which had evidently been cut from paper cartons, must have been aban-

doned somewhere by prospectors ; or possibly a stray Zambu had come by them on the plantations nearer the coast, and had brought them triumphantly home to his tribe. We searched carefully for other signs of white influence, but there were none. Not a word of English or Spanish was understood.

I cannot remember ever having had a greater surprise than in that moment when we first went into the hut with *M'tsamu*. We knew that we were in the heart of the wildest Indian territory, yet there hung two glaring advertisements for the most modern American products. They were as astonishing, in those presumably virgin tropical surroundings, as the *macabre* incongruities of a surrealist picture. And they gave far more pleasure. *M'tsamu* looked at them with a devotion that bordered on worship, and throughout the meal of fried bananas that he gave us he kept casting proud covert glances at the walls.

The most striking thing about that Zambu village was its complete lack of organization and order. The primitive tribes of our imagination, laboriously built up during the last six weeks from odds and ends of early learning, novels and films, lived in a regular and well-run hierarchy controlled by Chiefs and medicine-men. But the Zambus, at first sight, lived rather at random and in complete democracy. Apart from *M'tsamu* who had received us and decided that we were desirable visitors, there was no Authority. The whole village was in continual chaos and for ever working at cross-purposes.

By various devious methods of mimicry *M'tsàmu*

invited us to stay with him. His meaning was obvious, and he went as far as having our bags carried from the *pipanto* to his house. But here in the jungle, on the unmapped reaches of the Patuca, we were faced with a familiar problem; How long were we expected to stay? Try as we would, we found it difficult to express the words '*A very short time*' in any kind of language. It was a great opportunity, but we were still anxious to push to the real headwaters of the Patuca. Actually we stayed four days with *M'tsamu*, and they were well worth it. Rice and beans and turkey had become incredibly tedious: he fed us with bananas, bread fruit, avocados and venison. Most of the Zambu food is good, or at least it tasted good to us, but some is impossible. They have in particular several peculiar ways of dealing with bananas, such as burying them unripe for several weeks in damp earth, which produces a very smelly fermentation called *waboul*, and mixing the pulp of the fruit with the blood of a deer. Eating this for the first time was probably the greatest hardship undergone in the course of the expedition, beating the ordeal of the *Comandante's* Fire-water and Cigars by a short head. At the risk of offending *M'tsamu* we very firmly refused second helpings.

The Zambus of the Patuca are polygamous. But their polygamy is not the orderly marital pluralism of most primitive tribes; it is little more than sanctioned promiscuity. Wedding ceremonies take place four times a year, and in these the whole of the tribe takes part. Enormous dowries of gold dust and ornaments

are prepared and there is feasting and revelry for three days, after which there follows a matrimonial General Post. The young are married for the first time, and only those girls who have proved themselves capable of child-bearing are allowed to compete. Among the senior members of the village wives are exchanged and bought and sold, on the quarterly wedding-days, according to the whims of the husbands and the prices they are able to pay for their friends' wives. And, let it be understood, exchange of wives at any other time but the four appointed ' wedding-days ' is regarded as extremely immoral. As far as we could see the system was satisfactory, and caused no trouble.

The occurrence of a Zambu wedding-day depends upon obscure calculations based upon the movements of the moon, which is regarded with a great deal of awe and reverence. We could not find out from *M'tsamu* exactly what the calculation was ; our sign language was limited to expressing the more simple functions of life. But it was he who decided, on behalf of all the elders of the tribe, when it was time for a change. And luckily he saw fit to have one while we were with him.

There is nothing more impressive than the sight of a primitive people in a frenzy of ritual ecstasy, a group of human beings completely uninhibited and governed by instinct free from the warped temper of reason. There is nothing ludicrous about the wild natural force that moves them, so much stronger than the half-hearted passions of civilization, and it is a little frightening.

M'tsamu not only allowed us to watch the wedding but encouraged us, as he said the Zambus would be honoured to have us present. When we agreed he did his fairly intelligent best to explain the customs and rites of his people.

I think I have already pointed out that both Nigel and I, from the point of view of exploration, were extremely ignorant and had no scientific knowledge whatever. For that reason it is impossible for me to set down in orderly fashion those facts about the Zambus and the other tribes we were to meet later, which would be of use to ethnographers. The best I can do is to give a faithful account of the people as we saw them, and hope that among our random observations something intelligent will appear.

When we finished our evening meal with *M'tsamu* the village was already deserted and an indistinct rhythmical chanting was in the air, echoing faintly through the trees so that it was impossible to tell from which side of us it came. As we stepped from *M'tsamu's* hut into the circle of the other huts it grew louder, lifted, and then faded again into a silence that was only broken by the throb of the jungle itself. *M'tsamu* led us slowly out of the village picking his way carefully over the great roots and vines that crossed the path. For twenty minutes or half an hour we made our way through the undergrowth with our backs to the village and the river, twisting this way and that until we had completely lost all sense of direction. *M'tsamu* never hesitated although neither Nigel nor I could see any trace of a path or trail. Before long the

singing started up again and grew continually louder. By the time we reached the clearing, where the grass had been burned away over about twenty-five square yards, it seemed to fill the air completely, but it was still hard to tell from which direction the sounds came.

When we stepped out of the shadow of the trees into the ceremonial clearing the chanting died away quickly and the Zambus who had been sitting around a large fire in the centre rose to their feet and greeted us with '*Naksaa,*' '*naksaa*'! There must have been thirty or forty of them altogether, men and women, all from the seven huts of the village. *M'tsamu* told us that there were no other villages very near at the moment, for most of the Zambus were up-country, but that usually guests came from other tribes and entered the matrimonial market.

The arrival of *M'tsamu* was obviously the signal for the start of the wedding ceremony. We stayed on the fringe of the gathering, unnoticed, while he took the position of honour in the centre. The fire burned fiercely, red flames from the dry Santa Maria wood licking up into the night and giving a coppery red tinge to the Zambus. They were naked save for the skins of tiger-cats and deer, reserved for the more solemn ceremonials, which hung around their waists. Their black bodies were oiled, muscles shining smooth and strong in the firelight. It was the night of the full moon, but the sky was overcast and clouds covered the moon. *M'tsamu* held a consultation with the men around him in which we gathered that they decided to wait till the clouds parted, for the moon plays an

important part in their ritual. For a long time nothing happened, and we saw rows of flat black faces turned impassively upward. The silence was broken only by the sharp crackling of the fire. We waited.

After the arrival of *M'tsamu* the Zambus had grown much quieter, and there were no more of the wild lilting shouts that had carried to us through the jungle as we left the village. During the interval of waiting for the moon they remained silent, but there was a continual shuffling of bare feet upon the dry burnt grass, and we saw that they were arranging themselves in orderly circles around the central fire, women in the middle and men surrounding them in two rings. Finally they were quiet, and the depth of that expectant silence is a thing that I cannot describe. From miles around came the occasional noises of the tropical jungle, carrying crystal-clear through the hot night air. A raucous chatter from a baboon, the grunt of a boar and the flapping of heavy wings stood out vividly upon the incessant throbbing background croak of frogs and insects. The mosquitoes were swarming thick, but apparently the oiled bodies of the Zambus were immune.

I do not know how long we stood in silence watching the clearing and waiting for the moon to appear. It seemed like hours. We stood motionless and quiet, occasionally rubbing oil on our faces to keep the insects away. *M'tsamu* stood in the centre of the circles next to the fire, his face like the others turned to the sky.

The rift in the clouds came suddenly, and the pale rays of the moon broke through, giving a frigid tone to

the red lights of the great fire. *M'tsamu* threw his arms upward in a gesture of embrace. The men rose to their feet and began a wild chant.

There was nothing Indian in the sound of that song : it was pure African. At first it rose and fell slowly in a long lament, gradually growing quicker as the full disc of the moon appeared, till finally it was quick and rhythmical and the men stamped their feet in time as they sang. The chant itself was a monotonous theme on about four notes, but the words seemed endless.

From time to time a solo voice broke in with a few high-pitched words, then came the chorus again. As the song went on it grew faster and more animated, and the stolid reserve which is so characteristic of Indian tribes gave place to the spontaneity of their black blood. Gradually they were working up to a frenzy, and from their faces we could see that the men were quite oblivious of everything but the song. Finally the gentle shuffling of feet became a dance, and the two circles moved around the fire in opposite directions, tossing their heads back and waving their arms. The skins of their loin-cloths, dull yellows and browns, contrasted vividly with the polished jet of their naked muscles.

During the development of the ritual dance around the fire the women sat silent and still, eyes fixed on the ground. Like the men they wore loin-cloths, and above the waist nothing. For the ceremony, *M'tsamu* had told us, they were forbidden to wear any kind of ornament or decoration.

Now that the first part of the ceremony was approach-

ing its climax, we began to wonder what was to come. *M'tsamu* had told us nothing, beyond the fact that wives would be taken and exchanged. The dancing and singing were obviously no more than preliminaries. As the excitement grew we came forward into the edge of the clearing, since we were by now accepted in the village and *M'tsamu* himself had invited us to the wedding.

When the dance was at its height *M'tsamu* threw several handfuls of salt on the fire. As the flames turned yellow and leaped high into the air, the singing ceased suddenly and the men fell panting to the ground. Only *M'tsamu* remained standing, and there was silence. He held up his hand.

'*Naksaa, a moia na'o naksaa?*' (Greeting, O why do you come here?) In chorus came the answer:

'*Naksaa, a na nyakaa mao!*' (Is it not the time of the full moon?)

M'tsamu threw another handful of salt upon the fire.

'*Na a nyakaa mao!*' (It is the time of the full moon!)

At the end of this ritual of question and answer came silence again, then *M'tsamu* rose to his feet once more and made a very long speech of which we understood nothing. At first there was general approval, but after a few minutes the Zambus grew tired of listening and hushed conversations were started all over the clearing. By the end of the speech there was a considerable chatter, and *M'tsamu*, in common with many distinguished old gentlemen in more advanced parts of the world, found himself addressing an audience as restless

as it was bored. The Zambus were impatient for the next part of the ceremony to begin.

What happened next was very hard to follow, for our knowledge of the Zambu dialect was practically nil, and such information as we had received from *M'tsamu* had been imparted slowly and carefully with frequent excursions into sign-language and complicated representations made of pebbles and bits of stick. It seemed that there was from that moment no order about the ceremony. All the men began to shriek and gesticulate, holding varying numbers of fingers aloft to indicate what they were prepared to sacrifice from their own property in exchange for the wife of someone on the other side of the circle. It rather reminded one of a busy day on the stock exchange, and some of the transactions involved were suitably complicated: for instance, a man might be willing to buy another man's wife for his own plus a certain stipend, or he might wish to get rid of his own wife to some third party to get hold of enough salt to buy the bride of his fancy. The women, with maidenly modesty, sat in the middle with bowed heads. Apparently the Zambu woman has nothing to say in the disposition of her affections: but one hates to think of what happens to a Zambu who does his best to get rid of his wife, only to find that he must go back to her because he is short of money! A woman once married cannot be put aside unless a new husband is found for her: but there is nothing to stop the Zambu man, if he is rich enough, from having a dozen wives reserved for himself. Young brides are bought for the first time (often at an incredibly early

age) by negotiation with their fathers, who adjust their prices carefully according to the supply and demand. There is almost always a considerable shortage of women in any Zambu community.

The frenzied bartering went on steadily for a long time, while *M'tsamu* stood in the centre of the clearing looking benevolently patriarchal. He took no active part in the market, but occasionally shouted a few words to one man or another. There were a great many jokes made and a great deal of raucous laughter.

Little by little, as the men reached satisfactory agreements about their women-folk, couples began to steal away from the fire and disappear into the jungle. Presently even the disappointed men had made off towards the village, and we were left alone with *M'tsamu*.

There was still apparently work for him to do. In the strange vague ritual that is the religion of the Patuca Zambus, it is decreed that the ground upon which a wedding ceremony takes place is unclean and must be purified. It is for that reason that the full-moon ceremonies take place away from the villages, otherwise the impurity of the ground might blight the fruits of the weddings made upon it. *M'tsamu* scraped the ashes from the edge of the fire and scattered them wide over the clearing, chanting quietly to himself. He went about his business slowly and methodically, making sure that ashes had fallen on all the ground that had been within the circles. When it was done he pulled out his bag of salt and emptied the remains of it into the dying embers of the fire. For a few

minutes he stood staring into them, still chanting his prayer of purification. The ceremony was over, and the marriages made that night must last for three more months.

We had plenty of reason to suppose, from what we learned during our days with *M'tsamu*, that the Zambus took their quarterly weddings very seriously indeed. Of religion they had none : but the constant fear of evil spirits and hoodoos kept them singularly moral. We found it hard, with no means of fluent or accurate conversation, to learn much of the nature of their ideas : but certainly the African influence in the Zambu blood is enough to make them tremendously superstitious.

M'tsamu never mentioned the existence of any kind of Good Spirit in his theology : everything he did in his capacity as spiritual leader of the community was done to keep away ' bad spirits.' Compared to tribes we were to come across later on, where the Indian blood was the stronger and the legends of the country were alive, these Zambus had few ceremonies and fewer religious ideas. The greater the proportion of Negro blood, the more stupid are the tribes, and the more open to purely blind and unreasoning superstition. As the Indian influence grew stronger we found the natives far more intelligent, and their religions more advanced.

The Zambus had by this time begun to regard us as permanent peculiarities and lost some of their inquisitive interest in us. The wedding ceremony we had watched from beginning to end without protest or

question from them. They seemed pleased to have us with them, but it struck us forcibly that they had no idea of where we came from, and showed very little curiosity on that point. The gifts of salt and tobacco leaf we had given them established our *bona fides* far better than the passports and visas of civilization.

Chapter Ten

MEDICINE MAN

THE ritual of the Negro is joyful, a spontaneous expression of natural wonder, but the Indian brings in a mystic note of superstitious gloom. In the Patuca tribes where African blood has been freely mixed with Indian stock, the contrast of primitive rejoicing with primitive mysticism is very vivid. There is still, after several generations of mixture, a continual conflict between the traditions and natural tendencies of the races. During the wedding ceremony there was little sign of Indian influence : the dancing and singing and the character of the ritual had been African, showing nothing but the spontaneous cheerfulness of the Negro. But we were to find that Indian influence was stronger in other parts of Zambu life, when black blood fades into the background to make way for the obscure mystic mythology that is the heritage of the Indians. It so happened that on the day following the quarterly wedding an old man of the village died, and in the funeral rites which we were fortunate enough to attend it struck us forcibly that the Negro influence had almost entirely disappeared.

Zambu custom decrees that a man must be buried not before the first moonrise after his death and not after the second. In the interval no one may enter

his hut except to bring fruit and meat for the dead man, and provisions are piled high around him. *M'tsamu* was at a loss to give us a reason for this custom, and he quickly rejected our suggestion that it was in order to provide food for the dead on the journey to another world. He made us understand, with unusual vehemence, that there was no life beyond the earth, and that when one died that was the final end of all things. The supply of food seemed to be no more than a mark of respect, and we later noticed that there was no nonsense about burying good food with the body. The man's personal property was divided among his neighbours, since he seemed to have no living relations, and the provisions that had lain in his hut from the time of his death to the time of the burial were soon put to their natural uses by the whole community after the ceremony. There is practical common sense about the superstitions of the Zambu.

M'tsamu was from the first anxious that we should accompany the funeral party to the burial ground, and seemed a little worried that we might not care to do so. He thought that our presence might have some influence with the evil spirits, which according to Zambu belief are automatically invoked by the vital functions of birth, life and death. To avoid the evil effects of these spirits upon the village, all ceremonies are held at some distance : and for many months after a wedding or a burial no Zambu will venture near that part of the jungle that has been used. The powers of evil are collectively known as the *Mafia*, and are incredibly involved and frequently contradictory. But there is no

doubt that it is the *Mafia* who make the Zambus stick religiously to their customs and conventions.

There is no grief at a Zambu funeral. Life and Death are natural functions, expected and inevitable. Both are regarded with the same philosophical equanimity. The Indian rarely expresses violent emotion, and considers it rude to do so. Nothing would be in worse taste than to weep for the dead. As *M'tsamu* pointed out, with an almost Oriental resignation, only the unexpected can be truly a misfortune, so why grieve upon the occurrence of a commonplace event that for generations has been known to be inevitable?

A great deal of ritual, however, never fails to accompany a burial, and it is regarded as extremely provoking by the *Mafia* if one does not adhere to certain details. A corpse, for instance, must be carried feet first from his hut: before the stiffness of death has set in his knees must be bent and brought up to his chin, and his arms must be folded across his chest. A complicated mass of ritual surrounds a burial; but it is interesting to notice, from what *M'tsamu* had told us about the Zambu belief in the finality of life, that none of it is altruistic. It is performed religiously for the protection of those still living.

At the time appointed by *M'tsamu*, which was about four hours before sundown, the men of the village gathered in front of the dead man's hut. The women had to stay indoors and out of sight, as for some reason they were not allowed to watch the body being carried out of the village. The burial was to be performed

well away from the village, where the spirits could make mischief by themselves without causing any trouble. The men stood around the hut with expressionless faces as the four pall-bearers went in with the palm-leaf bier.

When the procession left the village *M'tsamu* took the lead, and after the body came the rest of the men in single file, shuffling heavy feet through the grass. As the last of the men fell in line, the women began to appear in the doors of huts all around the circle, and led by the eldest they followed on behind the men. Apparently they were to attend the rest of the ceremony in spite of not being allowed to watch the departure of the corpse from the village. We followed the tail end of the procession at a little distance.

M'tsamu led the way on for nearly an hour, twisting this way and that through the undergrowth. Like a game of follow-my-leader, the rest followed closely in his footsteps. Often we could see the long trail of black naked bodies snaking through the trees not far away from us, but no one diverged from the circuitous path chosen by *M'tsamu*. It began to grow dark, and as the quick night fell a high-pitched hum in the distance told us that the mosquitoes were out. The note rose steadily until it seemed to fill the air around us, and suddenly the swarms were there, humming angrily around the greased bodies of the natives. In all the weeks that we spent up the Patuca we were never able to get used to those sudden furious attacks of mosquitoes, although they took place every night as soon as darkness started to fall. It is impossible to describe

the sensation of first hearing that menacing hum, then of finding the air thick with swarm after swarm. During the lazy days of travel up the river, we had contrived a sort of mosquito-proof headgear to wear at times like this, although it was rarely enough that we were outside our mosquito-bars after sundown. To our broad hat-brims were sewn cheese-cloths which hung down round the face like a voluminous veil, tied tightly round the neck. Every other inch of our bodies was protected, and although long trousers and long-sleeved shirts were infernally hot it was well worth wearing them. The heat was further increased by the heavy snake-gaiters which we wore over our ankles and shins when ashore.

The slow procession marched on in silence. There was no moon, for the sky was heavily clouded. Some of the men and a few of the women carried burning torches to light the way, and now and then we caught sight of eyes glinting green in the jungle, as the glare startled them. Once a little deer rushed headlong across the trail between the women, dazzled and terrified, and went crashing noisily into the undergrowth on the other side. There was something about our solemn progress, with the red glare of the torches, that was far more impressive than the beginning of the wedding ceremony with all its rhythmic chanting. Instead of an air of expectancy and joy, there was an atmosphere of impassive mystery. It seemed as if the Zambus had inherited some of the mystic legendry of the ancient Mayas and Incas.

The place *M'tsamu* chose for the grave was on the

edge of the savanna, and as the leaders came out of the jungle into the tall grass they beat it down with sticks. Some of the tropical grasses that grow along the Patuca stand higher than a man's head and if the soil happens to be good the savanna is as thick as the jungle itself. As we left the jungle it became cooler, and a light breeze, very unusual at night, began to blow from the south, rustling noisily over the grass. We strained our ears to catch sounds from the front of the line, but the procession moved on in silence.

We did not halt till the whole file was well clear of the jungle and the tall grass surrounded us on all sides. Those in front stood fast while the last men and the women broke the single line and moved up so that they all stood together in a close compact square. Nigel and I stood in the shadow of a patch of grass that had not been beaten down.

With much shuffling of feet they arranged themselves so that the torch-bearers stood on the outside, the rest of the men and women enclosed by them in the square. Where *M'tsamu* was we did not know: there seemed now to be no need for leadership, as all the movements of the Zambus were carried out in orderly silence. The body was in the centre of the square, but we could see very little of what went on behind the blinding glare of the torches. For some minutes they went on shuffling naked feet, and the square grew tighter. The torch-light danced on the black bodies, now so close that the square was one solid mass. After a little while the movement stopped. *M'tsamu's* voice broke the silence, bursting out in a

high cracked register. We did not understand what it was he said : but evidently it was an order rather than an oath or a prayer, for the Zambus immediately set to a rhythmical stamping of feet. It was not the slow shuffle with which they had formed the square, but a heavy and regular beating of feet against the earth. Gradually we saw that the square was spreading and the torch-bearers were being gradually pushed outwards. At the time we had no idea of the purpose that lay behind this part of the ceremony. Later *M'tsamu* explained to us, with some difficulty, that it was to destroy the grass around the grave, for at the time of burial there must be no growing thing alive that could come between the body and the earth ; the dead man must go into the ground unhindered and unencumbered. For the same reason he is buried naked, and it would be regarded as very rash to bury any useful object of clothing with him. There is little logicality but much common sense in the pattern of Zambu superstition.

When *M'tsamu* judged that the vegetation in the funeral clearing had been sufficiently destroyed the stamping was stopped and the Zambus sat down in circles around him, men outside and women inside as at the wedding. The pall-bearers put the body down beside *M'tsamu* in the centre. Again there was a long silence.

It may be easy enough to give a faithful description of physical events, but to put down on paper one's impression of a ceremony in which silence played a major part is difficult. Where the ceremony of the

wedding was a ritual of real things, this Zambu funeral was one of atmosphere and mystery. For the same reason it was correspondingly more difficult for us to make any mental contact with *M'tsamu* on the subject, and it is possible that the ideas we formed are quite wrong. The difficulties of discussing theological questions in a primitive language one does not know are hard to imagine.

When the silence grew tense the Zambus sat around as if carved from stone. *M'tsamu* rose to his feet and mumbled an incantation which we could not begin to catch. From time to time he stopped short and there was a pause, as if he was waiting for responses ; but the others remained quiet. After some minutes of this he sat down again on his haunches, and the four who had carried the body came forward from the circle of men and drew the bamboo poles from the palm-leaf bier.

The whole ceremony went on in silence and at the same slow pace. After a series of signs and passes the pall-bearers began to wander about the clearing prodding the dry earth with the sticks : it was necessary to find the softest place, where the ground was most willing to receive the dead. Only there would he lie without arousing the powers of darkness. There was some discussion about which part really was the most suitable, but *M'tsamu* who had the deciding vote chose a sandy patch a few yards from where we stood. The bamboos were thrust into the earth one at each corner of the grave, and the four pall-bearers started digging with small trowel-shaped wooden spades. The soil was

sandy and dry, and it was not long before a large pit was hollowed out. A plain square grave, however, was not enough : Zambu custom decrees that a far larger and deeper hole must be dug at one side of the actual grave, so that the body in fact lies on a ledge in a much larger chamber. It took about an hour for this to be constructed to the satisfaction of *M'tsamu*, and when it was done three women came forward and lined the inside with palm leaves. Finally everything was ready : nothing remained but the actual burial.

Since the centre of activity had moved from the original position of the body to the newly-dug grave, there followed a renewed shuffling and pushing as the Zambus formed circles around the grave. Apparently there was something vital about the circles, and I think that they kept the evil *Mafia* inside so that they should not escape and harm the village ; but I am not sure of their significance, and put that forward very tentatively. It was a point upon which we could reach no understanding with *M'tsamu*.

The shifting of the centre of interest had brought us very close, and as the torches were brought to our side of the clearing we stood brightly lit up against the savanna grass behind. *M'tsamu* had until now ignored or forgotten us, in spite of his pressing invitation to attend : but seeing us there he came forward and motioned to us to sit down near to the grave. This we were not particularly anxious to do since we knew nothing of their ceremony and did not want to interfere. A burial is a depressing sight at any time and we had been quite content to watch from a distance. But

now it would seem rude to hesitate, for we had been offered a place of honour, so we came into the ring and sat down on the sand. The Zambus around said nothing, and there was no sign of expression on their stolid faces.

It was left to the four men who had carried the body to perform the rest of the burial. The mat of woven palm leaves, limp without the bamboo poles, was still apparently strong enough to bear the dead man's weight. They lifted it by the four corners and half-carrying, half-dragging it, brought the body across the clearing, then lowered it carefully to the ledge at the side of the burial-chamber. *M'tsamu* like the rest looked on in solemn silence.

The disappearance of the body below ground was the signal for general activity. The audience rose stiffly to their feet, for they had been squatting motionless in cramped positions for several hours, and *M'tsamu* burst into a long chant, a monotonous high-pitched dirge that cut shrilly through the night. After so many hours of silence his voice sounded very loud in the quiet savanna-land. Baskets of flowers, which had been brought from the village by the women-folk, were now produced and piled beside the grave. *M'tsamu* had explained to us that everyone must throw a flower upon the corpse before the roof was constructed and the grave finally sealed : but he had not warned us that we should be expected to participate in the flower throwing. He motioned to us and made expressive signs, pointing first at the flowers and then at the grave.

No one can deny that to be unexpectedly called upon to take part in a strange burial ceremony in a savage country is a trying experience and one apt enough to encourage stage fright. Luckily we at least knew what was expected. I was nearest so I went first, throwing a large orchid accurately on to the dead man's chest. Nigel followed me quickly but was less fortunate : his flower missed the body altogether and sailed down into the side chamber, which caused a considerable sensation. *M'tsamu* looked very shocked, and the other Zambu men who were waiting with more flowers began to murmur among themselves and there seemed to be some doubt as to whether Nigel should be allowed a second shot. After standing foolishly on the edge of the grave for a moment we retired again to the shadows, and the long procession of Zambus began to file past, every man and woman droppng a flower till soon there was nothing visible of the body. When it was done everyone sat down again and returned to sullen silence.

The last part of the burial was the placing of the lid upon the funeral chamber. The bamboo poles from the bier, which had also served to find the softest place where the earth would receive the body, were placed horizontally across the top, with shorter bamboos across them, so that soon the grave was neatly covered by a close network of sticks. When this was done the women came forward again with large palm leaves to spread : and the whole thing was covered over again with loose earth and sand. The funeral was over. A Zambu had ceased to exist : and because the ritual

had been meticulously performed the evil spirits which were aroused by the presence of Death were harmless.

It is impossible to arrange the superstitions of the Patuca Zambus in logical or symmetrical pattern. At least Nigel and I were too stupid or too ignorant to do so. Their whole philosophy is strangely mixed, and the Zambu mind has merged the traditions of three races without question or arrangement. A few of their customs can be traced among other primitive tribes : the habit of folding the limbs of the dead, for instance, is almost universal among aborigines, and many African tribes have corresponding ideas about carrying a corpse feet first (or head first) from his hut. Supplying a dead man with provisions, I am told, is also quite common, but I have yet to hear of another people who remove the gifts at the critical moment. Let it be understood that the Zambus are very backward, even among wild tribes, far less developed than the more intelligent *Payas* and *Secos* we were to meet higher up the river. The Zambus had no musical instruments, no artistic expression of any kind, and only the very crudest weapons. Their life is easy ; and the country is so rich that nothing ever really arouses their interest. Neighbouring tribes are peaceful and even timid. The climate quickly dissipates any sort of energy, and although the Zambus are so used to it they nevertheless feel the full strength of the tropical heat and spend most of their days in dignified relaxation. As far as we could see they were a very contented people, although signs of joy never actually

appeared. There was no disease, no question of having to work, no food shortage, and no knowledge of other things. They lived a quiet life of disinterested apathy.

Those were full and interesting days that we spent in *M'tsamu's* village. We had seen a wedding and a funeral, and as far as we could find out from him the Zambus of the lower Patuca have little else in the way of ritual. The question of birth he dismissed airily : it happened daily and no notice was taken of it by anyone. The life of the village was disorderly, quite unfettered by custom or politeness. Crime scarcely existed for there was nothing to steal that was not free for all on the ground or in the trees, and the general attitude towards any kind of misbehaviour was a safe policy of *laissez-faire*. Certainly there was no conception of an offence against the community as a whole.

We stayed longer than we had intended, but from the fuss that was made by *M'tsamu* it was evident that he had wanted us to stay far longer. In a country where events occur in decades, three days is a minute, but we had far to go and were dreadfully short of time. The Zambus had entertained us well, and in return we had given them quantities of salt, which is the most popular commodity, and handfuls of the raw tobacco leaf which they love. We promised to stop with them again on our way down.

As we pushed off from the river bank into the swollen Patuca the Zambus gathered to stare at us and bid us a polite farewell. They were still emotionless, standing silent on the sand as we paddled away upstream.

Fifty or more pairs of eyes followed us till we were out of sight round the next bend.

Alone again on the river we began to wonder whether our good luck would hold farther upstream in the hill country. It was too much to expect that we should do as well with the *Vicentinos* and *Secos*, and it seemed a little stupid to waste the opportunities that had already appeared among the Zambus. But we were determined to reach the highest navigable point on the river and as yet we had not gone far. Also there was something a little disappointing in the Zambus : they were more primitive than we had expected. From an ethnographical point of view they might have been the most interesting, but we were not scientists, and we looked forward to finding tribes that might carry traces of ancient Indian civilizations. The Zambus were altogether too lifeless and lackadaisical, probably on account of the climate along the flat coastal plain. In the interior were mountains ; and it seemed probable that the tribes there would be more vigorous and less swamped with Negro blood.

For many hot days we paddled and poled our laborious way against the current. It was hard, slow work, and at times we had to tack diagonally across the river when it was narrow and the stream ran strong. But it was more interesting than the earlier reaches, perhaps because we rarely had spare time for boredom. We were glad to be rid of the infuriating outboard motors, and working our way up-river without their clatter became quite pleasant. Also we were wiser : we knew how to protect ourselves from heat and mosquitoes.

On several of the days that followed it is no exaggeration to say that we were comfortable. There was only one thing that was a little annoying ; we had no way of filtering water, and when we both had to work all day there was no nonsense about boiling it. In the *pipanto* that we had lost in collision with the German flat-boat there was a pair of elaborate stone filters, but they had disappeared with the other things in the boat as it sank. Since then neither of us had drunk anything but the muddy water of the river, a tepid yellow liquid that may not have been particularly dirty but certainly looked it. We drank it daily in hurried gallons between spells of paddling. There was nothing for it but to drink it as it was, and after the first day we forgot the prophesies of typhoid and amœbic dysentery that had been made for us in Tegucigalpa. During all those weeks it did us no harm.

Chapter Eleven

MAFIA

DURING the next days we saw snatches of tribes, brief glimpses of black skins in the jungle and dug-out canoes hurriedly dragged from the water. Along the bank there were frequent signs of winter villages. But we did not linger ; this was still Zambu territory and whatever we found here would be something of an anti-climax after our success with *M'tsamu.*

There were a few things that stood out in those days. In a spirit of destruction I shot an alligator neatly through the head with my thirty-eight from a distance of some twenty yards, probably the luckiest shot that has occurred in any country. As a rule we shot nothing that we did not eat, but alligators are a sly unpleasant people and we had no compunction in killing them when we could. Wild turkeys were providentially plentiful, and it was rarely that a day passed without fresh meat. Unfortunately, a good many were shot that were never found, or that fell into the river and disappeared downstream.

Taking a high shot at a covey of Muscovia, Nigel lost his balance and very nearly put an end to the expedition by falling overboard. Luckily he had the presence of mind to jump clear without overturning the *pipanto*, which would have meant the loss of at least a large part

of our food and ammunition. The water was shallow and standing upright he was well in his depth, but the sand underfoot was soft and treacherous. Fortunately he had not lost hold of his gun.

There was nothing of real moment, and we found it increasingly hard to keep track of the days as they passed. For miles the river was the same, twisting endlessly through the jungle. Gradually we left the Zambu territories for those of the Payas, who are only very slightly lighter in colour. If anything the Payas seemed more elusive than the Zambus, and we had great difficulty in coming to close quarters with them. We knew that the jungle on both sides of the river was alive, but we pushed on upstream without wasting time. The river was becoming daily shallower and narrower and the thought of the brandy and cigars we had reserved to celebrate our arrival at the highest point spurred us on.

But although we had intended to carry on without another stop, there came an opportunity that was too good to miss. All along the Patuca the river banks are broken by little creeks, usually very shallow and overgrown, which lead off on each side. In these we sometimes tied up for the night, as they were well protected and the river itself became very rocky and rough. Some five or six days after leaving *M'tsamu* we came upon a creek in the left bank, wider than most and apparently quite deep, so we paddled into it and prepared for the night. The jungle was thick on both sides, almost meeting overhead, and only a narrow ragged strip of blue could be seen above. As night fell

the blue faded into a star-flecked black. The creek was larger than most of those we had passed, and from its width gave the impression that it led to something more than the stagnant sandy pools of the jungle. We settled down fitfully for a hot night. There was not a breath of air and the mosquitoes were in full spite. It was impossible to sleep, so we lay in the boat talking and smoking strong native cigars.

It must have been about midnight when we first caught sight of a reddish glow in the sky shining faintly over the jungle, far down the creek away from the river. We stared at it in wonder. The Patuca Indians make bonfires only upon ceremonial occasions and the fire that could turn the whole sky red above the high black line of the trees must be enormous. The jungle is constantly dank and sodden in Central America so that forest fires are almost unknown. We packed our things away hurriedly and started to pole slowly up the creek by the dim light of a small and uncertain torch. It was infuriatingly slow. We made hesitant and doddering progress with our flickering light and three minutes rarely passed without hitting a bank of sand or a lurking rock. It was a nightmare journey, but we were determined to satisfy our curiosity. As we made our way along the creek the light of the fires grew brighter, and in places where the top of the jungle was thin it shone through in a strip of vivid red lace. The black walls of vegetation on either side of us were alive with the indescribable noises of the tropical night, the constant beating croak of animal and insect life, but as we drew away from the Patuca it seemed as if a new sound

was added to the voices of the jungle. It was a long time before we could isolate it. It rose and fell alternately, and sometimes reached us in a sudden burst as we rounded a bend. Sometimes it rose to the pitch of a song, sometimes it fell to a heavy mumble, and as we made our tortuous way along the creek it grew gradually louder till the air was filled with it and the throbbing of the jungle fell into the background.

After three and a half hours' poling upstream the singing was louder than ever and there was no sign that the fires were dying out. We beached the *pipanto* and tied it up, covering it over lightly with leaves and sticks to hide it from stray Indians. To make a way through the jungle was hard enough but probably less tiresome than poling the heavy boat up a shallow and rocky creek. We took a sack of tobacco and another of salt, buckled on our revolvers and struck a line towards the light.

At first we could not make out what was happening. There were far more Indians than we had expected, and they stood in a rough semicircle around what appeared to be a large flat clearing. But after a minute or two, when our eyes were accustomed to the glare, we saw what it was : the creek had doubled around in a sharp left bend and suddenly widened out into a small circular lake. Along the edges of the lake, on the far side, were the Indians standing in crowded rows on the sand. Behind them there was a clear space where jungle or savanna grass had been cut away, and in

the clearing burnt the great fire whose glow we had seen from the Patuca. It was an enormous pyre, bigger than all the bonfires of Guy Fawkes' Day, and it burned with a fierce crackling that echoed sharply across the water. Red spits of flame leaped upwards into the darkness as the Indians added fuel to the blaze. They stood heavily in sullen rows, and only their high voices occasionally raised in song told us that there was something unusual in this ceremony. The naked bodies glowed red and bronze in the flickering light. It was a weird sight and it struck us at once that there was present the same atmosphere of suspense and significant silence that we had found at the Zambu funeral farther down-river.

The Indians were so numerous, and the difficulty of making our way across the lake in a dignified manner was so great that we decided to stay where we were, comfortably hidden in the jungle on the far side of the water. We did not want to frighten them or disorganize the ceremony, and we were not too sure what kind of reception we should get. We came forward to the sandy fringe of the lake and watched them.

It was hard to follow what was happening across the lake. There was little order and no leader and none of the sounds that reached us were familiar. These were Indians, and only the faintest traces of Negro blood could be seen. There was nothing African in their solemn chanting. It was pure Indian, ancient and mysterious. There was no dancing, no celebration, no fantastic masks and head-dresses, but only an endless beating incantation. It was impossible to guess

the significance of the ceremony. For all we could tell it might be a funeral, a wedding, or some fantastic invocation to the gods of harvest. Their high-pitched voices chanted on without emotion or expression. Until early morning, when the first pale rays of dawn broke through the jungle, they continued their solemn hymn and we watched in silence from the other side of the lake. As the eastern sky turned to an angry red the fires died away and the Indians turned and made off into the jungle.

When the far side of the water was deserted and the fires fell to flickering embers Nigel and I waded across through the thick mud of the creek to examine the ground. There was nothing to tell us the nature of the ritual; no graves had been dug, and the sand had been disturbed only by the heavy tramping of feet. No sign of life remained except the smouldering fires.

As the day broke we made our way back again to the boat and slept for three fitful hours in the comparative cool of early morning.

When we woke up again there was some question about what should be done. The scene that had kept us from sleep the night before had fascinated us and it seemed stupid to go on up the Patuca without finding out more about the Payas. They were obviously different enough from the Zambus to justify investigation, but on the other hand time was getting extremely short and we were far behind schedule. It was impossible to tell how far into the jungle we should have to go to find their villages. If they had the same idea as

M'tsamu's people their ceremony would have taken place some way from where they lived. Finally, with typical indecision, we drifted back into the main Patuca and poled slowly upstream close in to the left bank. If we saw no more of the Indians, we would go on : but if, as seemed probable from the fact that they had made off on a line parallel to the river, we saw signs of them, we would stop and try to make friends.

In the evening we found the village, a ring of palm-leaf huts standing close to the water's edge. As we drew up to the sand the Indians came running from their huts and clustered around our boat.

The Payas, I think I have already said, are rather lighter in colour than the Zambus of the coast and the lower waters of the Patuca. They are the second stage in the varying Indian-Negro ratio which can be seen throughout Mosquitia. The powerful black blood of Caribs and fugitive African slaves from Jamaica and the West Indian Islands has penetrated to some extent but has still left much of the Indian intact. As the years go on, we learned, the Payas grow gradually darker, for the coast Negroes are innumerable and prolific. But there is still enough Indian in the Payas to make them silent and to give them that false expression of sullen bad-temper which is so characteristically Indian. They are quicker-minded than the Zambus, but for this, apparently, physique has been sacrificed, and many of those we saw in that first village were obviously consumptive. Like the Zambus they are peaceful and have nothing but the most primitive hunt-

ing weapons. Life is easy enough in the Mosquito jungle, and the climate does much to discourage any kind of violent activity such as attacking the tribes of neighbouring territories.

Their lives are bound up and ordered by a great mass of complicated Indian legendry which we could only begin to understand. We found them much shyer and more timid than the Zambus, although they accepted our presence without any fuss. Oddly enough, although their lands were farther up-country than those of the Zambus, they were already slightly familiar with the phenomenon of white men, for some ten years before two prospectors had lost their way (very badly) while travelling in Nicaragua, and had found themselves wandering in the Mosquito territory. There seemed to be no central patriarch like *M'tsamu* to take the lead in tribal affairs, and there was no one among them particularly anxious to explain things to us. We got the impression that we were accepted but not encouraged.

The dialect of the Payas is incomprehensible, and not apparently related to any other known tongue. Among the people of the lower waters a few distorted English words can be heard and there is also a smattering of Spanish, but above *Bratislaya* there is nothing but the staccato vowel-less dialect of the Indians. Their vocabulary is small and to the point, for their ideas are few and simple and they never waste time and energy (or rather energy, for that is scarce and in Mosquitia there is always plenty of time) in talking unless there is something of immediate moment to say. The Paya uses one

set of words when speaking to a man and a completely different one when speaking to a woman, which considerably complicates the question of language; but women are regarded as very unimportant and while we were there it was rarely found necessary for anyone to speak to the women-folk, who outnumber the men by about two to one.

The Payas believe in two Gods who are in eternal conflict to control the destiny of mankind. Unfortunate events, such as floods and hurricanes and babies being eaten by alligators, are blamed alternatively upon the unusual activity of the Bad God or the laxity of the Good God. It is left to the medicine man, called the *Suquia*, to decide which cause lies at the root of the evil and to prescribe appropriate remedies by feasting, revelry or prayer. The *Suquia* is the chief figure in the village: he is judge and doctor and almost king. Each village is led by a *Suquia*, and we noticed that although the general body of natives were well disposed towards us and usually rather inquisitive about our affairs, the medicine men were inclined to be a little cool in their welcome. Their leadership is founded on a prestige of mystery, and they are supposed to understand those things which are hidden from the rest of the tribe. The presence of white men, with strange tricks of noise and fire, was a menace to them, for although we did not seriously rival their power we could not help demonstrating that the *Suquia* were not omniscient. They looked at us with an air of rather hurt and embarrassed anxiety.

The principle of Paya ceremonies is celebration. If

the provident deity is to be pleased, an atmosphere of revelry is obviously suitable ; and every Paya Indian knows that if a ceremony is directed towards the Gods of Evil there is no hope of placating them anyway, and one might just as well drown one's sorrows in strong drink. An abundance of liquor is brewed as a preliminary to all religious functions, from yucca and oranges and cassave. It is a particularly powerful drink, spiced and fermented, and in the damp heat of the tropics it takes very little to set the party going.

The Powers of Darkness are called the *Mafia*, and are shared with the theology of the Zambus. Their pacification, frequently necessary, provides a reason and excuse for the wildest orgies. We could not begin to understand the significance of all the phases in the ceremony, since our position among the Payas was insecure and we could not make any efficient lingual compromise. But we could watch, and the significance of part of the ritual was easy enough to follow.

The Payas show originality in holding certain ceremonies at midday instead of in the middle of the mosquito-infested night. Usually Indians prefer darkness for the functions of their religion, for it adds a mysterious and sinister note which they love, after the manner of children who are frightened of the dark and rather enjoy it ; but the Payas are for some reason (probably their lighter skin) more susceptible to mosquito-bites than the Zambus, and they choose the full burning heat of noon as the lesser evil.

The placation of Evil Spirits is a long business. The ceremony itself starts when the sun reaches its fierce

zenith, but for days beforehand the womenfolk are engaged in brewing and distilling potent concoctions designed to help the spirits on their way. Fruits and berries, herbs and roots are brought from the depths of the jungle and for thirty-six or forty-eight hours on end there is a constant boiling and stirring of pots. The production of liquor is the monopoly of women : and my suggestion that men might engage in this task was met with great scorn and disdain. They stand around in happy circles expectantly sniffing fumes from the cauldrons as their wives go about the work. But when the time comes for the ceremony to begin, as we were to see, the women are sent quietly home and are even forbidden to taste the drinks they have mixed. It is typical of the Indian division of labour, and the Payas in particular prefer bachelor parties.

The first part of the ceremony is drawn out interminably to make sure that those participating are properly thirsty. Since the object of the affair is to please the *Mafia*, there is no need to move away from the village, which is not unduly afflicted by the presence of the Powers of Darkness when they are in a good temper.

Nigel and I sat in a hut at the edge of the village circle. Above us the heavy roof, bamboo and thatched palm leaves, was alive with the rustlings of great beetles and fantastic spiders. As the ceremony began, a little red snake dropped to the floor and slid away into the tall grass.

The centre of interest was the middle of the clearing,

where the *Suquia* had been preparing the ground for the festival. The liquor which the women had been making during the last few days was placed there in large earthenware pots, and each pot was surrounded by a pen of bamboo stakes, brightly painted and carefully sharpened. These sticks must have had a symbolical importance in the ritual, perhaps showing that the *Chicha* liquor was reserved for the Gods ; for they were very light, and had not the Indians' reverence for the ritual been so strong, they would have provided very poor protection. There were seven bamboo pens altogether, each one enclosing some eight or nine square feet of sandy earth. Of the womenfolk there was no sign : they had gone off, according to their custom, several miles away into the jungle, where they had to stay until the pacification of the evil spirits was over.

In eager expectancy the men stood around just inside the line of the huts. The *Suquia* stood in the ring near to the bamboo pens, an old bent man with a large stomach and a cascade of kinky white curls falling over his ears. From the far side there arose, suddenly, an irregular insistent beating which brought silence upon the Indians. We could see the drummers, three young boys sitting cross-legged on the ground and pounding their staccato music upon small deerskin drums. For a number of endless minutes there was complete silence, broken only by the drums. Once again there came to us, vividly, that impression of ominous and expectant silence while the Payas stood as if carved from rock, faces blank and expressionless.

Gradually the pace of the drums grew faster and

faster, and a shrill wail arose from a chorus of bamboo whistles that had joined the drummers. There was nothing melodious about that sound, and it rarely happened that the notes of the whistles combined with anything approaching harmony, but the effect of the whole scene and the music was one of pregnant mystery. It typified all the blind grotesque power of ancient savagery.

The *tempo* rose from pace to pace till it reached a fanatic frenzy and the drummer boys were throwing arms and legs about in frantic ecstasy. But the circle of men remained dumb and motionless : for it is considered very bad taste for an Indian to show emotion of any kind except on certain occasions, and the time had not yet come for them to abandon the carefully cultivated composure of their race for the free expression of instinct. As the music reached a discordant fever-pitch the old *Suquia* stepped forward and held up his hand. Immediately the drums and whistles stopped short in their climax. We wiped the running perspiration from our eyes and waited.

I have no idea what it was that the old man said to his tribe. In a high cracked voice he spoke for several minutes, apparently addressing the assembly and not the spirits. He spoke slowly and without excitement, and his words seemed to arouse no interest in the congregation. It was probably a fixed formula, part of the prescribed ritual for the occasion. He stopped abruptly.

Following upon the *Suquia's* speech there was relaxation. The men shifted their feet and wiped their faces

and began to chatter among themselves. They were still standing without cover under the full searing heat of summer sun.

After a short while the drums began again without warning, in a slow heavy beat. But now the atmosphere, in a flash, had changed : there was talking and shouting, and the men began to stamp their bare feet in time with the drumming. They laughed and occasionally raised their voices in high Indian falsetto. Soon the boys with the whistles joined the drums again and the circle started to move around, stamping and shuffling, in slow rhythm. From that moment it seemed as if the first part of the ritual was to be repeated, with the difference that reserve and dignity were forgotten. As the men dropped their solemn Indian masks their Negro blood came to the surface and they let themselves go in wild abandon. The music grew faster again and the circle danced around in a fierce fandango, naked bodies running wet in the sun.

It was a very long time before the climax was reached, and only the strength of ecstasy kept many of the men from collapse. Finally the music stopped short and there was a sudden heavy quiet. The Indians fell to the ground exhausted and panting.

Now came what was obviously the most important part of the ceremony. Until that moment there had been nothing to distinguish it from countless other affairs intended for various purposes : now the attentions of the *Suquia* were directed towards the *Mafia*. Purpose had appeared in the ritual. The Indians began to recover and squatted on their haunches around

the circle. Again there was a long pause in which nothing happened.

We had thought, at the beginning of the ceremony, that all the huts were empty and that the women and small children were well away in the jungle where they could not prejudice the *Suquia's* efforts at appeasing the spite of evil spirits, but this was not quite true. During the pause that had followed the last stages of the ritual dance, several women had been brought from one of the huts. As they were led into the clearing we saw that they were blindfolded, and were all strikingly thin, which is remarkable in Mosquitia where the Indian women nearly always run to fat. The thinness of these women would have been noticeable anywhere : they wore no clothes and their ribs stood out like fish-bones. The *Suquia* took them and led them to the bamboo pens. With much mumbling and incantation they were arranged so that there was one thin woman in each square. Once inside the protection of the stakes they took the bandages from their eyes and stood blinking in the dazzling sunlight.

At the time we had no idea what part the women were to play in the pacification of the *Mafia*, and it was not till considerably later that we found out ; but from the reader's point of view it will perhaps be best if I explain their presence before going on to describe what followed. They were mediums, who could establish contact with the Evil Spirits and pass their wishes on to the *Suquia*. Why thin women in particular were chosen we could not find out, but it seemed that extreme thinness was connected in the Paya mind with

chastity and virtue, and that the women were hence able to know things that were hidden from the others of the tribe, and even from the *Suquia* himself.

The mediums squatted on their haunches and the drum-and-whistle band started up again. The men sat around staring at the thin women. Their communion with the spirits was about to begin.

This time the music lingered for a long time in a slow *tempo*, the women rising and gyrating in time to the rhythmical drum beats. Every now and then they stretched their arms aloft in supplication and occasionally a voice was raised, high and thin like the wails of the Shee, as contact was made with the *Mafia*. The medicine man stood watching intently and at his signal the circle of men rose again and closed in, stamping and clapping their hands to the music. After ten or fifteen minutes the thin women began to shriek questions above the din, questions of importance to the tribe and concerning calamities and misfortunes which were in store for them. When would the river rise again? and when would the great winds (the hurricane season) blow again? As the ceremony went on the questions came faster and some were repeated several dozen times. Meanwhile the drums had quickened pace again, and the men were swaying back and forth in a close ring. The mediums, who had at first gyrated slowly in their squares, now whirled furiously and threw their scrawny limbs around in incredible contortions. It could hardly be called a dance, for there was nothing of rhythm or grace in their steps: but it was very fast, a fantastic ritual of acrobatic frenzy. Their eyes stood out in

ecstatic fervour and as the music approached its third climax they too were on the point of collapse in the fierce heat. The sun beat down steadily, a burning golden ring in the sky.

The third climax was the last. At the *Suquia's* word the drums and flutes were silent, suddenly and finally. The thin women stepped from their wooden pens and gathered around him, and he led them off together into the jungle, where they would make their report to him and give him the messages from the evil spirits.

The departure of the *Suquia* was the signal for the more festive part of the celebration to begin. Instead of falling to the ground as before, the men stood expectantly in a close ring, edging towards the bamboo stakes, and as the old man stepped out of the circle they surged forward in an eager wave. The pens were trampled underfoot and the earthen jars of *Chicha* were emptied down parched black throats. The effect of that fiery liquid upon men who had been dancing for hours in the full heat of a mid-summer tropical sun must have been terrible, but it was poured down like so much cold water and an enormous quantity had been prepared. The formal part of the ceremony was over.

Later we made friends with the *Suquia.* We gave him matches, and half a bottle of Fruit Salts (an impressive fountain of magic) and a leather belt, and he tried to explain to us about the *Mafia.*

The *Mafia* are nothing more nor less than the Devil, except that they are expressed in the plural. They are of indefinite and infinite number, a co-operative society

of mischief-makers who are eternally at war with the corresponding Powers of Goodness. In strength and number the two sides are approximately equal, and the world (or at least the Mosquito Coast) is their chessboard. But since the Gods are equally divided into those who are Good and those who are Bad, it is obvious that Man, who is admitted to have a will of his own, holds the balance of power and can influence his fate not inconsiderably by its judicious use. We sat talking to the *Suquia* while the Indians drank the bowls of *Chicha*. As it took possession of their senses the noise grew and from the jungle all around us came wild shrieks. Their Indian reserve disappeared, and for the rest of the day and all through the following night there was a drunken uproar around the village. Occasionally the drums took up their beat, no longer close at hand but off in the bush, where their note was menacing and compelling. The *Suquia* left us sitting alone, and all through the night we sat in the hut listening to the wild voices of the Payas in the jungle as they screamed and sang.

Chapter Twelve

TZOCAL

THE Payas had performed so well for us on the previous day and through that wild night, that when dawn broke we were not anxious to leave them. They did not welcome us; but they were tolerant. On the following morning there were few signs of life and Nigel and I were tired from our watching. We decided not to push on up-river but to sleep a few hours and investigate the village. As the women came out in ones and twos we stumbled down to the river-bank and the boat. We had been tired even the day before, and we slept all through that day and the following night.

When we approached the Payas again they were more responsive. We had watched and even taken part in their ritual; we were friends. The medicine man who had led the ceremony took us up to the village and offered us a meal, the first we had had in over thirty-six hours. Well before the sun reached its hot zenith we were squatting in a circle in his hut for lunch. It was an enormous meal. There were alligator pears and papaya, venison and malanga plantains, all laid out in order upon great filigree leaves of Yucca, and to drink we had cassave wine, strong and bitter. The medicine man was called *Tzocal* or its equivalent. He was an old bent man with a pendulous stomach and long silver

rings of hair, very unusual for an Indian. He ate in silence and we followed his example. The meal lasted for a very long time. When the last of the fruit had disappeared his women-folk, flat-footed slatterns with drooping breasts, came in from the neighbouring hut and cleared the sandy floor.

I had brought a handful of black Honduran cigars from the boat and we showed them to *Tzocal*. He had never seen tobacco in that form, but only in the raw leaf which the Payas grow for their pipes. We lit them and his joy was tremendous. He sat on his haunches and puffed steadily, without a word or a pause for breath, until the hut was filled with the peculiar greenish smoke that emanates from Honduran *puros*, and there was nothing left but a sizzling black stub. Reluctantly he threw it away as it began to burn his fingers. He rose to his feet and danced with joy, pleading for more cigars. Clearly this was an opportunity to learn all we wanted of the Payas. We told him that he could have plenty more if he would answer our questions and try to understand what we wanted. It must be remembered that with these people our language difficulty was enormous : the only common ground was the smattering of Zambu we had picked up. Apart from that we could do no more than make signs, weird elaborate devices which frequently conveyed erratic meanings. It was a game of patience and ingenuity and intuition, but it was never very accurate. I have no right to put down the facts that we gathered as relevant pieces of tribal ethnography, because nine sentences out of every ten are founded on guesswork.

For all we know *Tzocal* may have been doing no more than tell us Paya bed-time stories or a series of local jokes. But these are the things we understood and deduced from what he said.

The native medicine man is not so much a physician as a sorcerer. He deals in magic more than in drugs, and among the Payas it is regarded as rather ludicrous to put one's faith in the natural properties of barks and herbs. Most medicine men have but one drug, a monumentally powerful purge which is prescribed for any illness that is obviously too unromantic to be caused by the persecutions of the *Mafia*. I think I am right in saying that this panacea, brewed from the bark of a tree, is the only piece of *materia medica* in use at all. Other more serious complaints are dealt with and driven out by magical amulets and charms, and mystic incantations. The faith of the Paya is in the spirit and not in the flesh. But disease is rare, as a variable reason for ill-health : there is one disease only, tuberculosis. To an unskilled eye it seemed probable that three out of every ten Payas were consumptive. Tuberculosis is regarded more as an unfortunate event than a disease and there are a great many charms to keep it away. Very few Payas are rash enough to go without a deer's tooth hidden somewhere about them to protect their lungs. There are charms against fevers and charms against snake-bites and charms against the dangers of the alligators that swarm in the river, for these are the common perils of life in Mosquitia, and are thought to be the chief weapons of the *Mafia*.

Snakes throughout the river country are very poison-

ous and common, yet the natives take very few precautions against them. They go barefooted through the jungle, relying only on their own quickness to avoid snakes and dangerous spiders. A great many of them die every year from bites.

When we were ashore we always wore thick boots and leather gaiters which protected us well. The dangers of snakes are apt to be overrated by people who have not lived among them, and it is not usually realized that most snakes will move away as quickly as possible when they hear someone coming. They are chiefly dangerous when startled, and it is asking for trouble to step clumsily over a fallen log without first beating around it with a stick. Snakes only strike downwards so that the most exposed part of one's foot is the top of the instep ; the other parts of the leg can usually receive only a glancing blow, which is effectively averted by an ordinary thickness of leather.

The most deadly central American snake is the *Rabo de Hueso* or bonetail, more commonly known as the *Fer de Lance*, a thin snake that grows to as much as five feet in length without being any thicker than a man's finger. The *Fer de Lance* is lightning quick and frequently fatal. Commoner than the *Fer de Lance* but almost as deadly is the *Coralito*, a tiny snake, vivid red with black rings.

The Payas ascribe magical properties to the skin of the *Coralito*, and many of the women wear them as gaudy necklaces around their black necks. A Paya who wears a *Coralito* skin protects himself from other kinds of snake-bite. *Tzocal* rummaged in his hut and

brought out an ancient skin, almost turning to powder, with the warning red rings merging dirtily into the black. He mumbled to himself, spat on the skin, and rubbed first Nigel's forehead and then mine ; now we were safe from all poisonous bites, for the *Coralito* was strongest of all snakes, and its protection shielded us. But we did not take off our hot leather leggings.

Tzocal thought that we came from very far away, perhaps even as far as the end of the great river, where there was no more land and nothing but an eternity of water. He knew of the ocean ; but it had not entered his head that there was something beyond the water. The end of the river was the end of the world. With a lime and an avocado for a planetarium we explained about the rotation of sun and earth, and how the land from which we came lay on the other side of the globe ; he nodded intelligently and stared in wonder, waiting for more. But he did not believe us, and made us understand that had that been true, we should long ago have fallen off. We left it a moot point : to explain why one did not fall off the far side of the earth was beyond possibility. And in any case I do not think either of us really knew.

From *Tzocal* we discovered that the Payas are even less formal than the Zambus in their marital relations. It was hard to find out exactly what family system was in use, and we came to the eventual conclusion that they followed nothing more binding than a happy policy of connubial *laissez-faire*. The family as such did not exist : the smallest unit of community was the

village, and the segregation of groups of people into various huts was a geographical rather than a social division. The medicine man was a benevolent despot who settled all questions of communal life, and arranged the eugenics of the village. Like many Indian tribes the Payas are not highly sexed. To them the problems of marriage are unimportant and a little boring. This lack of organized family life rather took the wind out of our exploratory sails, for it had been firmly impressed upon us in England, by learned friends, that this basis of the community was all-important, and that even if we discovered nothing else we were to investigate the family systems of the Mosquito tribes. *Tzocal's* frank revelations at once relieved our minds of a burden and left us without an immediate objective for inquisitiveness. As far as relations were concerned the Payas were singularly unencumbered ; and those that existed were ignored.

The village, it seemed, was at once the smallest social division and the only one of any importance. Although the Payas recognize their tribe, and can distinguish themselves from Zambus and Vicentinos and Secos, this distinction is not really significant as the tribes never trespass on neighbouring territories. Inter-tribal warfare never occurs ; it is much too hot and there is, after all, nothing to provide any attractive *casus belli* within the Mosquito preserve. Occasionally a Zambu wanders up-country from the lagoons or the Tom-Tom Cut-off, or a Vicentino makes his way down from the hills. If he arrives in a Paya village he is well received and treated with courtesy ; but his wel-

come is cool, and almost British in reserve. This custom probably accounted for part of the Paya's hesitancy in accepting us when we first drew our boat up in front of *Tzocal's* village. They were obviously wildly interested in us, but it was contrary to the strictest principles of Indian policy and etiquette to make a fuss over us.

Tzocal held the same views upon the subject of death and immortality as those we had found among the Zambus. Death was final : and beyond it there was neither reward nor punishment. He recognized nothing as morally wrong, and as far as we could see the only act that was unpopular among the Payas was murder, which in any case was a very rare event. There was no other crime. In *Tzocal's* village (and I believe in all Paya villages) property was communal, jointly owned by the members of the village, so that the question of theft did not arise.

It is hard to explain the enormous apathy of the Mosquito tribes, that complete lack of incentive to do anything, that is part of the tropics. There is an abundance of natural foods, plenty of room, and a fierce climate that destroys the seeds of energy ; so one lives in peaceful inactivity, an almost vegetable existence that is disturbed only by the periodical religious ceremonies.

The Payas are not creative, nor are they artistic. The only form of native music is the harsh discordant flute-and-drum improvisation which we had heard for so many hours on the night of the ceremony. Apart from that there were a few songs, bawdy jingles on two

or three notes with endless repeated verses, and nothing more. Never did we see a stringed instrument of any kind. The Payas are naturally silent, and when they raise their high voices in song it is always with a rather self-conscious air.

The graphic and plastic arts, too, are almost absent, and *Tzocal* knew of no way of expressing an idea except by speech or gesture. Unlike the Guatemaltecan Indians, the Mosquito tribes seem to have no creative urge. They do not paint, they do not weave or make pots, and even wood-carving is rare and utilitarian. It seems that in the fusion of Negro and Indian blood something of each has disappeared, and the modern tribes are left without any of the natural manual cunning of primitive folk. Only in the ecstasy of religion or wine can the Payas rise to an expression of feeling, and then for a few brief moments one can catch glimpses of the primordial instincts of their ancestors, now in a rhythmic African beat, now in the dark silence of Indian mysticism.

It is hard to say whether this mental and physical apathy comes partly from the fusion of the races or whether it is entirely the atavistic effect of generations of life in what must be the worst climate in the world. In either case it is a pity, for in the local tribes the standard of life is at the moment retrogressive, and the best features of wild Africa and America are disappearing in a gradual process of absorption by the power of the tropical jungle.

We stayed for another two days and nights with the

Payas, resting and washing our clothes, arguing with *Tzocal* and giving away salt and tobacco from our diminishing supply. The tribe considered that the ice was now broken, perhaps because we had seen them when they were thoroughly in wine, and their original shyness vanished. For hours on end they sat silently around us, staring and wondering. Every day they brought us fresh fruit and meat, far more than six men could comfortably have eaten.

Tzocal had an heirloom that had been handed down in his village from the days of the *Conquistadores*, and which was their communal pride. In itself it had no value to them, but it was an antique and an article of reverential awe which gave a certain possessory distinction to their village. It was a horseshoe, rough cast and immensely heavy, with nine square nail-holes set about its rim. *Tzocal* kept it hidden away in a hole under the floor of his hut, covered and guarded by an enormous flat stone. Not until our last day in the village did he dare bring it out : finally pride overcame his discretion. We handled it reverently, wondering where it had been forged and how it came to be in the Paya territories. The old man took it from my hands and scratched at the surface with a broken finger-nail. The dull patina that covered it came away easily, and the sun's rays struck it and brought out a yellow gleam. It was pure beaten gold.

He explained to us that among the Mosquito tribes there are a number of these horseshoes, carefully guarded and preserved. Although they have no intrinsic value, for money does not exist, the appeal of

pure gold is recognized anywhere, and the tribes cherish their golden horseshoes. We looked at it with renewed interest and saw that it was far too large to be worn by a native mule. In any case it was no shoe for a working animal : it had been cast for the thoroughbred Spanish stallion of one of Pizarro's followers.

Later we followed *Tzocal* to a stream, some five hours' walk from the village, which was supposed to be particularly rich in gold deposits. Some of the womenfolk, whose task it was to collect gold, came with us. I was anxious to see what method they used to extract the metal from the sandy bed of the stream, for although I had frequently seen prospectors ' washing ' gold from rivers with fine sieves, these Payas had nothing of the kind.

We pushed through the jungle in single file, the old man leading at a pace which we could hardly follow. Behind us came the women, barefooted and chattering. There was no visible trail, but *Tzocal* never hesitated, thrusting vines and grotesque tendrils aside to clear a path for us. Compared to our lumbering progress he moved almost in silence.

As we drew away from the Patuca the jungle grew thicker and seemed if anything more densely fertile. It was not hard to understand the vast power of the tropical jungle, and to see the constant warfare existing between it and the Mosquito tribes. The incredible lavish abundance of vegetation made it impossible to make any inroads against it ; cut down a rank weed and in a week three new ones had grown up to take its place. The clearings made by the Indians for their

villages, in which every blade and shoot is burned or cut down to the ground, are kept clear of vegetation by constant watchfulness throughout the season; but after a village has moved, within three months the jungle closes over it again, and there is no sign that the solid undergrowth has ever been disturbed. The lavish fertility of the Mosquito jungle is one of Nature's most enormous extravagances.

It was very hard to keep up with *Tzocal* in spite of the fact that he had the extra task of clearing the way. The earth was never clear underfoot, but always a treacherous mass of tangled vines and roots. The old man skipped lightly from place to place, twisting his lithe black body to avoid thorns and the sharp grasses, while we stumbled and tripped in our heavy boots, and our shirts were torn to blood-stained shreds. The women came a little way behind, keeping pace easily, and giggling at our awkwardness.

When we reached the stream, which was a rocky little brook not more than ten or twelve feet across, Nigel and I were so worn out that the question of washing gold dust from the bed of the stream was for the moment forgotten. We threw ourselves down in hot relief and bathed in the stream. The thought of having to retrace our steps through that maddening jungle was intolerable, so we set to discussing ways and means of getting back to the Patuca by water. We had started from *Tzocal's* village at dawn: it was now nearly eleven o'clock, and the heat of the sun was increasing every minute. We decided that when it was cooler, and the gold-washing operations were concluded, we

would walk back to the main river along the bed of the stream. *Tzocal* did not think this was a good idea, and respectfully refused to accompany us. None of the Payas are fond of water, and a day's quick travel through the thickest jungle presents no great difficulty to them. Later we found that we should have been better advised to follow his example.

Gold-washing is an incredibly simple operation, a matter of patience rather than of skill. The idea is to extract, from the sandy bed of a stream, such minute particles of gold dust as have been brought from elsewhere by the flow of water, and which have become very finely mixed with the rocks and sand. Nowadays there are more modern processes for the extraction of placer gold, such as amalgamation and chlorination; but the ancient method of washing remains simple and reliable.

While we sat with *Tzocal* on the wet sand, the women brought two flat pieces of mahogany from the jungle. They roughened the wood with sharp stones, making long criss-cross scratches diagonally, then placed them in the water, flat side uppermost and facing the direction of the current. Under the lower ends they propped stones, so that the pieces of wood lay at an angle to the surface of the water. Each piece was four or five feet long, and the lower end of each was some nine or ten inches higher than the upper end, which was clear of the water. The apparatus was complete.

By this time we were mystified. It seemed unlikely that finely divided particles of placer gold would collect

on flat mahogany troughs. The women stood in front, so that their bodies were between the troughs and the source of the stream, and bending down in the muddy water they began to scoop up handfuls of sand and throw them upon the wood. As the stream water ran over the mahogany the sand was slowly washed off again. It was a slow and laborious process, for they used only their hands ; and from time to time the clumsy apparatus had to be moved upstream.

After about an hour's work Nigel and I waded out to examine the surface of the mahogany. Clinging to the roughened surface and glinting in the sun were tiny grains of finely divided gold, a minute deposit evenly distributed over the wood.

We could not wait to see the second stage in the process, which was the removal of the gold dust from the mahogany, as it was now well after midday and we did not know how long we would take to reach the Patuca again by wading along the muddy stream-bed. But *Tzocal* explained to us, by cutting off part of a slab and giving a practical demonstration, exactly what was to be done. When the washing process had gone on for long enough the troughs were taken out and left to dry in the sun : after this large yucca leaves were spread on the ground and the mahogany was scraped over them with flat sharp stones. The result was a pile of wood shavings lightly coated with gold. These shavings were wrapped in the leaves, again left alone for another period of thorough desiccation, and then opened out flat and exposed to the air on a windy day. In time the light particles of wood blew away, and

there remained only the pure scatterings of gold dust. A simple enough process, but one which was laborious and rather inefficient.

Tzocal told us that nowadays the Payas rarely bothered to collect gold dust, although in his youth it had been a common enough occupation. A few prospectors have wandered through the country and a lot of the native hoards have been bought, usually for a few handfuls of salt or good tobacco. *Tzocal's* village had never before seen white men, but they had heard tales of prospectors and were warned against them ; for that reason they had at first been rather on their guard with us.

We left the gold-washing party in the stream and started our long trek down to the Patuca, rolling up our trousers and hanging our boots and leggings around our necks. The current flowed slowly, a sluggish red stream with a squelching sandy bottom. All the way along there were great rocks and rough boulders, carried along by the violence of the swollen waters during the hurricane season. It was slow work because our feet sank deep into the sand and we had to be continually rearranging our loads to avoid wetting our guns and ammunition, but it was infinitely more pleasant than stumbling and lurching through the jungle.

As we drew away from *Tzocal* and his party the stream narrowed gradually and became more irregular, twisting this way and that in short rocky curves. We were not quite sure whether it joined the Patuca below or above the village : but we had a compass and a fairly

good idea of our direction at the start. Soon the sun began to sink and as it grew cooler we increased our pace, to make sure of reaching camp before dusk fell and the mosquitoes attacked us.

That journey seemed endless. For hour after hour we dragged ourselves wearily through water and mud, sweating and stumbling. It seemed that as we approached the Patuca the stream twisted continually away from it : and we began to wonder whether it ever reached the main river at all. By the time it showed signs of growing dark we were cursing our preposterous self-confidence and wishing that we had gone back with *Tzocal*, however fast his pace.

As night fell the jungle on either side of us turned suddenly solid, massive and black, and there started that incredible nocturnal throb of animal voices that never failed, after many weeks, to make one stop and wonder. Presently we heard the warning hum, high pitched and menacing, of the mosquito swarms ; and all at once they were upon us, covering face and arms and hands. The air was thick and it sounded as if that maddening scream had suddenly filled the whole universe. Frantically we splashed water on our faces, which kept them off for a few seconds, but it was a hopeless struggle. Our shirts had been torn to ribbons during the morning's journey so that the mosquitoes covered our bodies too, and every so often we threw our things in desperation on the bank and lay down under water to rest. The situation was very unpleasant but there was nothing for it but to go on, in spite of the mosquitoes, and hope to reach the river and the village

before we absorbed enough poison to be dangerous. The rest of the journey was a nightmare ; by far the most unpleasant part of all our time in Mosquitia. We stumbled and fell continually as it grew darker, splashing violently through the water and stubbing our toes against rocks every few yards. It is impossible to describe even a part of that maddening journey, and we were particularly infuriated by the knowledge that it was entirely our own fault ; through stubborn laziness we had refused *Tzocal's* advice. And it served us right.

When we finally reached the Patuca the moon was out and the broad surface of the river shone palely against the dead black mat of the jungle background. We reckoned that the village lay to the east of the stream, since we had not passed the mouth on our way up the Patuca from the Zambu territories. How far it was we could not tell ; and now there was a further difficulty, in travelling by night, which we had not foreseen. At night the main river is thickly infested with alligators. If we were to wade along in the water, as we had done in the creek, we should have to run the danger of meeting them. Ashore, the vegetation on the river bank was black and thick. If we had found travel through the undergrowth difficult in the daytime, it would be considerably more so in the faint moonlight. We decided to try the river.

For a long time we splashed up the Patuca, kicking out lazy feet and making as much noise as possible. Alligators are easily frightened and usually keep away from any disturbance in the water. We carried our

revolvers loaded and ready and watched the smooth surface of the water for suspicious ripples. Once Nigel fired twice at a floating log, drifting slowly in mid-stream : but that was the nearest approach to an alligator that we saw.

By the time we found the village we were dead-tired. Our faces were puffed and swollen with bites, our bodies were a mass of sores from scratches and the long soaking in the water. Both of us were bleeding in a dozen places.

In the village a great fire smouldered and the heavy wood smoke kept the mosquitoes at bay. We dragged off our sodden filthy clothes and fell at once into dull drugged sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

WAMPU JUNCTION

TZOCAL left us to sleep until the late morning, and when we woke up we were so sore and stiff that it was agony to move. Our faces had puffed up into purple blotches; and from the waist we were both covered with scars and the swollen lumps of mosquito-bites.

The old man refrained, like a gentleman, from any kind of reproof or even a hint of 'I told you so.' He brought us bowls of soup and some avocado pears, and told the women to bring fresh leaves for us to lie on. For the rest of the day we stayed in the hut, washing ourselves and rubbing vaseline into our scars. From time to time the other members of the tribe would peer in at us and click their tongues in sympathy. The Payas have a great respect for the mosquitoes and are never under any circumstances caught out after dark.

In the afternoon there happened the calamity which I had feared and expected for several weeks: fever. Whether it was brought on by our ridiculous performance of the day before or not I do not know, but by nightfall Nigel had it badly, and was shivering and chattering with cold. We had by this time run very short of quinine, on account of the losses of supplies

farther down the river, and for a fortnight or more we had taken our morning doses only irregularly. There was fortunately a little left (our only medicament) and I fetched it from the *pipanto*.

Tzocal had a very violent cure for fever which he prescribed for Nigel, but I did not think that the constitution of a mere white man was quite up to it. It consisted of giving him a very hot and sudden Turkish bath in a wooden case that looked unfortunately like an ordinary coffin. Steam was supplied by dropping red-hot stones into a trough of water inside the box. He was a little offended that I did not trust his medical judgment, but I contrived to explain that we were made differently from his people and that steam was particularly bad for us. Regretfully he carried his Turkish bath away. I gave Nigel ten grains of quinine and covered him up well. The change in him was extraordinary ; his face was white under the tan, deep rings appeared under his eyes, and his hands were blue. There was nothing I could do but wait until he started to sweat.

For an hour or more Nigel shivered, until the fierce sun declined and it began to grow quickly dark. Then, suddenly, he was hot and dry, red in the face and thirsty. Before long his mind started to wander and he rambled on deliriously with the persistent inconsequence of fever. *Tzocal* came in and sat down, still mumbling about his steam-bath. Until late at night we watched him, and at midnight I gave him another five grains of quinine. Soon after that the fever broke. First a few beads of moisture gathered on his face, then

he began to sweat and in two or three minutes he was soaked. Six times we dried him, and finally he fell into a heavy sleep.

The next day, contrary to all calculations and the habits of nature, it rained ; a great torrential outburst that quickly made the river swollen and red. Nigel felt well when he woke up, but if the fever of the day before was malaria, as we thought, then he was due for another in the afternoon. The rain gave us a good excuse for not starting off up-river again, as Nigel thought that he was quite well and wanted to be off at once. But he was still weak, and it would have been ridiculous to start immediately.

It rained all through the night to the accompaniment of a violent storm, one of those vast electrical infernos that only happen in the tropics. The thunder rolled almost continually and kept the Payas awake, shivering nervously in their huts. From the door of our own we watched the great yellow forks of lightning biting through the sky. In the sudden vivid flashes of light we caught glimpses of black faces in the doorways of the other huts, turned heavenwards and wide-eyed with terror. It is extraordinary that none of the Mosquito tribes, who live in an area that is regularly swept with tropical storms, have ever managed to lose their fear of the primitive force of nature. Thunder sends them cowering at once to the protection of their grass huts. It is the work of the *Mafia*.

If the storm kept us awake, it also suppressed the mosquitoes, and it was a display that was worth watching. To someone who knows only the half-hearted

claps of temperate thunder, it would be unbelievable ; one might as well compare a rock-garden in suburban London with the Mosquito jungle. It lasted through the night, and as day broke the rain stopped all at once, as if a gigantic tap had been suddenly turned. Before long every cloud had gone from the sky.

Nigel had now passed forty-eight hours without a return of fever, so we thought that it would be safe to move on.

Tzocal was even more reluctant than *M'tsamu* had been to let us go. A few days, he said, was nothing, and what difference could it make? We could not tell to him that in our country time was reckoned carefully, and that we must return at a certain date. It was beyond us to explain the white man's stinginess with time and beyond him to understand it.

A little before eight o'clock we packed the few things we had left in the boat, took our leave of the Payas, and pushed off into the stream. They all came to the water's edge, where they stood in a solemn line to watch us out of sight. We gave them a few parting presents of salt and tobacco. They had already filled our boat with fresh fruit and meat ; and paddling hard we left them.

For nine days after leaving the Payas we paddled up the Patuca, eating what we could shoot and sleeping with considerable comfort in the flat bottom of the boat. By this time it seemed easy : we had learned the

technique of the river, of sleeping and cooking and paddling with the smallest expenditure of energy and the greatest effect. It was so infernally hot that our energy was a valuable store, to be hoarded and guarded as carefully as a miser's gold. We grew to avoid any physical movement that was not useful. As the long hot days passed, uneventful and unbroken, we became sympathetic to the awful apathy of the Indians : we, white men of a virile race, felt the deadening effect of Mosquitia after a few weeks ; they had known nothing else for countless generations. It was a climate and an atmosphere that suffocated every desire, that crushed every seed of energy.

Nothing very much happened during that fortnight. We travelled much as before, paddling and poling and sometimes dragging the heavy boat over rocky patches, occasionally shooting alligators, sometimes sketching, always watching the black walls of the jungle.

Only once did we try fishing, not to replenish our commissariat but for fun. The Patuca is shallow and muddy, and such fish as live in it are unclean. With a large hook and piece of turkey meat we whiled away hours waiting for a bite. Finally it came, nearly dragging into the water a case of ammunition to which the end of the line was fastened. Nigel seized the line and played the fish while I kept the boat steady. After a while he dragged it on board ; a fresh-water shark, white and unclean. We threw it back quickly.

There was still fortunately plenty of game and we

never lacked meat. Our own provisions were nearly gone—the rice and flour and beans—but we were so tired of them, after the monotonous diet of the lower river, that we did not care. We still had salt and a quantity of lard and whenever it was possible we collected fruit. Water we continued to drink, contrary to the tenets of medicine and common intelligence, straight from the river.

Oddly enough after leaving the Payas we saw no further signs of life in the jungle or on the river, not even the flattened patches of ground which marked the spots where old villages had stood. It looked almost as if we had gone beyond the limits of the Indian territory, but both Zambus and Payas had told us vague tales of folk who lived higher up the river and spent most of their time in the rocky Colón mountains, where it was cooler and the jungle thinned out. Here the rank undergrowth of tall grass and vines, great lianas and grotesquely stunted trees, was thicker than any we had already seen, and we were followed on the bank by an eternal chorus of chattering monkeys. There were also a great many parrots that screamed in fury as we approached, fluttering fantastic feathers. All these things in time we took for granted ; and when we went ashore we hardly noticed the incredible profusion of exotic life. There were lizards, emerald-green and enormous ; great bull-frogs and toads in fancy dress ; scorpions and spiders from a fit of *delirium tremens* ; and here and there lurked deadly surrealist snakes. With familiarity their fascination faded and their dangers grew contemptible. Carelessly we stepped over them,

beat them away with sticks or threw stones. We lacked the energy to take them seriously.

On the ninth day we reached the end. The river had been narrowing sharply, and now it was too shallow to go farther. In front of us lay rocks, thick and large, in the form of a long gradual waterfall. To go farther by boat was impossible.

On either side of the river were flat sand-banks that separated the water from the jungle. It was an ideal place; and we decided to pitch a camp here and from it explore some of the surrounding country. With relief we dragged the *pipanto* up upon the sand.

For so long had we looked forward to reaching this place, the Wampu junction, that it was with a curious flat feeling of finality that we lay on the ground to rest. It was hard to realize that our journey was done, and that from now on we should be on the return route. During the months of planning at home and the weeks of struggle in Honduras and along the coast, our imaginations had run riot on the subject of Mosquitia and what we would find there; now we had reached the farthest point of the Patuca, and most of the surprises lay behind us. We had had no time to digest the things we had learnt.

From logs and rocks we built a sort of corral on the sand in which we could sleep without the danger of alligators, and over it we rigged an awning of oilskin slung on four poles. Around the whole thing we hung two thicknesses of cheese-cloths to keep away sand-flies

and mosquitoes. This was to be our base-camp, from which we could make short treks into the Colón mountains.

For two days we did nothing. The sudden bliss of sleeping in comfort and spending the day under shelter was too attractive to let the joys of exploration drive us out. We rested and mended our clothes, and made notes of what we had done. A map of the river took up much of our time, but it suffered from a good many misfortunes and never attained a very high standard of accuracy.

That first night we slept soundly, a better night than we had had since leaving Clayton Cooke's house on Brewer's Lagoon. By the river's edge it was cool and the cheese-cloth nets were successful in excluding even the most enterprising mosquitoes. Later, however, we found that it was something of a fool's paradise. In the middle of the third night a heavy scraping noise woke us up with a start. Luckily there was a full moon in an unbroken sky : otherwise we might not have seen the alligator that had waddled up across the flat sand and had managed to clamber over one low wall of our camp. Almost simultaneously we both shot at him with our revolvers, but without luck. He turned, as quick as a flash, and slid slyly into the water, with a flip of his tail that brought our mosquito-netting down with a run. Immediately the swarms were upon us again, covering every inch of exposed skin as they had done during our unfortunate experience near *Tzocal's* village. We did not dare jump into the river ; but the next best thing was to build a smoky fire. Nigel collected wood while

I lit the Primus. We worked furiously, vainly slapping at ourselves and exterminating futile handfuls. Finally the fire was going, and they retreated. We repaired the net and drove the last mosquitoes from the inside ; but it was a troubled night, and neither of us slept much more.

The next day we consolidated our position somewhat by building earthworks around the coral and piling all our available possessions upon them, and as an additional precaution we built a fire outside and kept it going all through the night. We did not really expect further visitations from the river, but sometimes snakes have an unpleasant habit of curling up in the folds of one's bedclothes at night, to keep warm, and we thought that a large fire might act as a deterrent to them, or alternatively as a counter-attraction. The rest of our nights at the Wampu camp we spent undisturbed.

Our arrival at the highest navigable point of the Patuca called for celebration. It was a long delayed moment, of which we had despaired more than once. Solemnly we brought out the brandy and the cigars that had come with us, to our eternal credit, intact from Tegucigalpa. It was an odd scene ; Nigel sitting on a small wooden crate, I on a petrol drum. We smoked a Corona each and drank old brandy from battered tin mugs, a dreadful enough affront to any wine. In the distance we could hear a chattering baboon, and suddenly the shriek of a macaw. A big lizard, saffron and emerald green, scuttled across the sand. It was a moment of enormous satisfaction which

indelibly and suddenly confirmed our preference for civilization. The attractions of a lackadaisical and carefree savage Indian life seemed all at once very small.

In the evening, before it was dark, a big alligator slid up from the water and lay heavily on the far side of the camp. We had been sitting quietly, and he had apparently just fed. After a few minutes his long upper jaw rose into the air and a little bird flew into his mouth to pick the pieces from between his teeth. Fascinated we watched this improbable piece of co-operation. The bird hopped from place to place, pecking impertinently, and the alligator lay still, green eyes half-closed. But there was something so revolting about an alligator at close quarters that we wanted to drive it away ; perhaps because of the stories the Zambus and Payas had told us of children eaten alive, and the numbers of missing arms and legs we had seen among them. The smell of musk, too, which is characteristic of alligators, was strong and nauseating.

It happened that at that moment Nigel was coiling a stout rope, which we had once used for towing another boat. He made a noose in the end of it, swung it around his head, and dropped it neatly over the alligator's erect jaw. For a minute there was pandemonium : the alligator whirled around in fury, pulling Nigel forward and against one of the corner posts of the camp. The awning came down with a run, covering both of us. We were caught fast, ridiculously, under a net of tarpaulin and posts, furiously kicking arms and

legs about in an effort to get free. The cheese-cloth mosquito-bars, which had been rolled up around the edge of the tarpaulin, came unfurled and spread themselves over the rest of the confusion. It was a fantastic situation : we were entangled in a vortex of oilskin and cheese-cloth, holding fast to a rope which in turn was firmly tied to the upper jaw of an alligator. To our relief, however, the strain on the rope increased, and we let it run out. When we had struggled out of the camp it was still running out, foot after foot, and disappearing into the muddy river. We disentangled ourselves too late to catch the end ; but we saw it, the thirty-fifth foot, sliding across the sand and slipping into the water. Alligators are no braver on land than they are in the water.

That night, very late, we had another visitor. I woke up at about one o'clock to see a pair of eyes, tiny and close together, moving silently across the sandy floor of the hut. There was full moonlight again, and after a minute or so I could make out the shape of a little animal almost within arm's length. It was smaller than a full-grown cat, and had we not been in the tropics I should have guessed that it was a squirrel. It moved without noise, suspiciously and timidly. With infinite care I worked myself up to a sitting position and caught it suddenly by the scruff of the neck. It kicked wildly and clawed the air, and let out a shrill scream that woke Nigel and made him dive for his revolver. We turned on an electric torch and examined it. It was, as I had thought, something like a squirrel : later we discovered that it was called a

Pezoti. What it would be in English, or if it even has a name, I do not know.

We put it in a large crate for the rest of the night and provided it with various assorted foods so that we might examine it in the light of day. For a while it scratched and whimpered, then there was silence and we fell asleep. In the morning the crate was empty.

The next night it was back again, less timid ; we fed it well and it retired again to the jungle, but for several more nights it visited us for a meal, always arriving rather inopportunely at about one in the morning. We gave it scraps of anything ; meat and fruit and even hard biscuits, all of which seemed equally well accepted. Before we broke camp it was quite tame and lived happily with us, eating our food and sleeping by the fire.

The *Pezoti* was obviously a tree-dweller, for it had prehensile toes and could jump to an extraordinary height. It had a long thick tail, rather after the style of a kangaroo ; but as far as we could see this served no similarly useful purpose. When we came down-river again it followed us faithfully, travelling contentedly in the boat. Only when we reached Brauvila creek did it leave us again for the jungle.

Those days at the Wampu camp were pleasant. We had no violent work, we were comfortable, and there was a feeling of satisfaction at having reached the place at all. It was without much enthusiasm that we made plans for going on overland into the mountains. The

river was temperamental and cantankerous, but we had mastered it ; the dangers and difficulties of the jungle were largely unknown. We toyed idly for a while with the idea of following the rocky bed of the Wampu up to its source, but the idea was impracticable, for it meant going all the way on foot, and in any case we had already arranged to meet Robert Trapp farther down the river with our fresh supplies, so as to make a portage across from Brauvila to the Guarunta river, away to the South-east of the Patuca.

The Honduran jungle according to native rumour is plentifully stocked with small jaguars and large tiger-cats, but we had so far seen neither. At night it was possible every now and again to hear roars which one could not connect with baboons or wild boar ; and these, we assumed, came from some kind of four-footed animal. While we were at Wampu we made several determined efforts to stalk them, without success. We were much too noisy in scrambling through the jungle. The roars were always in the distance ; and usually came from any direction in which we had not been going. But although we never managed to find any *Tigria* there were other rewards in the jungle. We did our hunting by night, when all the jungle is awake, lighting our way with electric headlamps strapped to our foreheads. The effect of those thin powerful beams was incredible, for the moon had gone and each picked out a neat yellow segment from the blackness of the jungle. As we went along there were eyes shining from the darkness on either side, fascinated and hypnotized by the light, just as a bird is hypnotized by the eye of a

snake. We could clearly see them, glinting in green or reddish pairs, but it was hard to tell what kind of animal they belonged to. They stood transfixed until we had passed, then there was a brief scuffling in the leaves and they were gone.

The tracks of the *Tigria* were very plain and fresh each day near the camp, and had we taken the trouble it would not have been difficult to find them. Struggling through the thick tangle of undergrowth was hardly worth while; and at best they were poor game, as we found later on near the Guarunta river. There were plenty of deer, which we shot as we required meat, and occasionally a wild boar. It was not good sport, but it was easy to keep ourselves alive.

Our plans for the next fortnight or so were vague, nonchalantly left for decision *when the time came*. We had a reasonable margin before our *rendez-vous* with Robert Trapp, and in any case he could quite well wait for us at Brauvila. The only factors that governed the length of our stay at the Wampu junction were the supply of ammunition, the necessity for returning to England by the end of October, and our inclination. Now that we had come so far it seemed stupid not to push on for at least a little way into the lands of the hill tribes to see what was to be found.

To decide which direction to take was a more difficult problem. The river junction was surrounded, except down the Patuca, by tall trees, and one could see

nothing of the distant country and the mountains that we knew lay to the west and north. Some of the trees were not difficult to climb, so we waited till dark and I climbed the tallest, to look for the glow of native fires in the distance. There was nothing to be seen but the dead black of the forest, and over it a mass of stars. From the lie of the land I could see that the range of the Colón mountains lay farther to the north than was shown on the map. I took a compass bearing, and in the morning Nigel climbed the same tree by daylight and checked it. The jungle was thicker by the river's edge than inland, where it thinned out, and there were frequent stretches of tall grass. If we struck out towards the Colón mountains the worst part of the going would be over in six or seven hours' travel.

On the following morning, at the crack of dawn, we started inland on the compass bearing that we had taken from the tall tree. We had built up the camp with logs for protection, and had with us ammunition and food for about four days.

After two hours it became hopeless. There was no way of keeping to our course in a maze of foliage that was so vast and eternally the same, and in places the vegetation overhead was so thick as to make it quite dark. At the present rate of progress we should never reach the clear ground before nightfall, and for two of us to sleep unprepared in the heart of the jungle without equipment was unthinkable. With relief and regret we made our way back on our tracks, following the course of broken foliage and occasional blazings with-

out difficulty. Our shirts had already been torn to shreds and our backs were bleeding. There was no hope of getting through this jungle without cutting it down.

Chapter Fourteen

VICENTINOS

THE next day we tried the other alternative; to go up the rocky bed of the Wampu, well out of our course, until easier country was reached, and then to double back right-handed towards the mountain range, where it seemed most likely that tribes were to be found. Certainly there were none in this kind of jungle.

Paddling barefooted up the river was easy and even pleasant, a rather idyllic journey in which we lazed along without having to think of problems more complicated than stubbing our toes against the rocks. It was far too shallow for alligators or fresh-water sharks, and seemed to be the one continuous and considerable patch of Mosquitia in which there lurked no kind of poisonous denizen at all. We splashed along in silence, collecting scattered thoughts and keeping cool in the tepid muddy water. It was the most comfortable travelling we had yet done. There was a pleasant isolation from the hot vastness of the jungle. We dragged on automatically, without thinking or feeling very much.

It was essential to get through this part of the journey before dusk, so we went on steadily without stopping to eat, gnawing cold turkey as we walked. For several

hours the jungle that walled us in on either side showed no sign of growing thinner. Fortunately the Wampu was straighter than most of the rivers in Mosquitia, so that although it led us in a direction that was far from our objective, it did not do so with the devious circumambulations of the Patuca.

By about four o'clock that afternoon we were clear : the jungle broke suddenly into tall undergrowth, then into long savanna grass that stood a foot or more above our heads. For the first time that day we felt the full heat of the sun. In the shade of a tree we stopped to reconnoitre and to compare our compass bearings with the course of the river. It was hard to guess how far we had come.

Until nearly dusk we pushed on again, beating the grass down laboriously. The ideal instrument for this is the Honduran *machete*, a long flat knife with a wooden handle, but unfortunately we had none with us now. The grass was tough and springy, and most of it was sharp enough to tear through our shirts. Finally we reached a clearing, a rough patch of barren rocky soil where no grass grew. We threw our things down in discouraged relief ; this was much harder than we had anticipated, and it looked rather as if we should be forced to return without finding anything of interest in the high land. We were particularly anxious to find the tribes of this area, because they are almost pure Indian, and the overwhelming power of the Negro blood has not yet reached them. That was what we had learned from *M'tsamu* and *Tzocal*. Here, if anywhere, was the untainted ancient stock.

The first part of the night was stagnant and hot. There was not a breath of moving air, and it seemed as if our clearing was sealed tight by the tall grass around us. We were enclosed in a small circular space, an insignificant little patch in the vastness of the jungle. Before midnight a serious calamity occurred : without warning the sluices of heaven opened and poured down upon us a torrent of heavy sheeting rain. We were soaked through before we had time to realize what was happening, and for the first few moments it was a cool relief from the sultry heat of the night. This kind of rain, however, was likely to last till dawn, and there was little we could do to protect ourselves. With our waterproof sheets we did our best, and spent the rest of the night in a squelching semi-bog. It was at least cool and with heavy rain falling our mosquito-nets were no longer necessary.

As we had expected, the sky cleared at dawn and the torrent stopped as abruptly as it had begun. The parched ground underfoot drank the water at once, and by noon was again crumbling and dusty. The jungle remained sodden and dripping all day. A slight breeze sprang up and brought with it a faint smell of musk from the river. We sat on the ground despondently, unable to decide what to do. Cutting through this grass without proper instruments was agony ; and there was no telling how much farther we should have to go. Also the question of a fresh supply of water was becoming important.

It was while we were still sitting there in a fit of sudden depression that the extraordinary thing hap-

pened. There appeared at the edge of the grass, without any audible warning of approach, two small men. They were almost the colour of a sun-tanned white man, but their faces were flat, with blank sloe-shaped eyes, and they had the characteristically straight blue-black hair of the Indian. Nigel and I were taken so much off our guard that we did nothing but return their wooden stare. It was the last thing we had expected to happen while we were still so far from the mountains. Finally we stood up and greeted them with the Indian '*Naksaa.*' At once they knelt down, still without any sign of expression on their faces and returned our greeting, '*Naksaa, naksaa.*'

Many hours later we reached their village, a large Vicentino settlement in the foothills of the Colón range. Again we had to start afresh on the language problem, for they understood very few of the phrases we had picked up among the other tribes. We discovered, and I take the risk of general incredulity when I say this, that the Vicentinos knew we were on our way towards their territory. I do not know how they knew, any more than I know how they were able to locate us in the jungle, in a tiny clearing which we had reached only by chance. Our course since leaving the Wampu had been purely arbitrary, and there was no question of following a trail. When we understood that they were asking us to go to their village, we went gladly, walking easily in the path which they cleared for us.

The Vicentino village was larger, cleaner and better built than those of the river folk. It stood on rocky

ground, substantial and well spread out. From the first moment the Vicentinos seemed superior to Zambus and Payas. As we came into the neat circle of houses they ran up to us and gathered around, curious but dignified. They were little men, not up to our shoulders, but they were quick and agile, and seemed to have escaped some of the apathetic indolence of Mosquitia. The climate in which they lived was better, since it was nearer the hills ; and they had not yet been contaminated with the sluggishness of Negro blood. In that first moment as we stood by their village it was impossible to see any of the signs of mixed race that were so obvious among the Zambus. Their lips were fine and tightly drawn, and every head of hair was jet black and straight. The menfolk had gathered together to face us in a body. If we had been unaccustomed to Indians they would have appeared hostile, but we had long since learnt that their wooden expressions meant nothing. Some boys ran out from the crowd and took our packs from us. Without fuss or even conversation we were ushered into the circle, then to a hut that stood on the far side.

This reception was as surprising to us as had been the silent appearance of the messengers. It was hard to tell whether the matter-of-fact way in which we were accepted was due to their inscrutable reserve or to previous familiarity with white people. After our arrival at the village there was almost complete silence—occasionally a curt syllable or two, but no excitement and no voices raised above a half-whisper. This funereal air of mystery was disconcerting, for it was the last

thing we had expected and it was so vastly different from anything we had found among the other tribes.

Once in the hut, we were alone. Our guides went away, lowering a curtain of dead palm leaves across the entrance. In one corner lay our things which the boys had brought across. We stood in the middle of the earthen floor and stared at each other. Did the next move lie with us or with them? It was nearly dark and in the middle of the village circle we could see a smouldering smoky fire. Around it moved four or five Indians, silently feeding it and fanning the embers.

After a while one of the men who had found us in the early morning came back. He talked for some time, with gesticulations, but we understood nothing of what he said. We made simple gestures to show him that we were both hungry and thirsty, which he apparently knew already, for before he had left us there arrived two young girls with food; turkey and venison, with avocado pears, and some calabashes of lime-juice and water. Apparently we were to eat alone. By this time it was quite dark, and we could see the man's face only by the light of the village fire, flickering red through the palm-leaf curtain of the hut. We sat on the ground and ate our meal while he stood watching us, silent and almost without moving. When we were done he went off for good and before long the village was silent but for the crackling of the fire.

We slept uneasily that night. Too many surprises had been crowded upon us during the last twelve hours to let us rest, weary as we were. Again we had been incredibly lucky in finding the Vicentinos; but their

reception puzzled us considerably. It was impossible even to guess at what was in their minds.

In the morning our friend was back again, rather earlier than we should have liked. Behind him came another man, and both were carrying a number of assorted articles—a pair of boar's tusks on a grass lanyard, a snakeskin bracelet, and a quantity of fruit and meat. There was no mistaking their intention : these were presents for us. Gratefully and with a great deal of fuss we thanked them. Now we were in a predicament, because we had nothing much to give them, and among the Mosquito Indians presents are very firmly expected as well as being freely given. I went over and looked, without much hope, through our ragged possessions. Two spare shirts, some boxes of ammunition, a camera, two compasses, some rope, a tooth-brush each and a few odds and ends—nothing impressive and nothing we could easily do without. A second look, however, brought inspiration : we had a spare sheath knife, in addition to those on our belts. This was an ideal gift, and the chances of our both losing our own knives and needing the spare one on the return journey were very slender. With ceremony I bowed and handed over the knife, together with a length of rope and two boxes of matches. He took them silently as his due, without surprise, mumbling incomprehensible thanks, and went out again. From the doorway we saw that our presents had been too much for him ; they had completely broken down his Indian reserve. Dancing across the village circle he struck matches right and left

VICENTINO COUNTRY: Colón Mountains

(he had seen us using them before), throwing them in the air and shouting. The rope he wound tightly around his middle like a wide belt, and into the top of it was stuck the knife. Our presents were obviously a great success.

When he reached the open a crowd gathered around to question him and to finger the things we had given him. Under the stress of this sudden excitement a few voices were raised, but only momentarily and with a rather self-conscious note. Most of the men and all the women merely stood, firmly planted on bare feet, staring and wondering. With wooden eyes they looked at these things that were beyond their understanding, then at the door of our hut, then slowly back again. Strange thoughts were turned over, ponderously, in their simple minds. We had shaken them suddenly from their comfortable apathy.

From then on our work with the Vicentinos was much easier. The wonders they had seen destroyed rather than increased their suspicion of us. Soon the strange atmosphere of mysterious silence that had impressed us the day before began to disappear. We found that they created an air of sinister wisdom, like some of our elder statesmen, by virtue only of profound and uncompromising silence. It had nothing behind it, and when they dropped it they were as simple and frank as the Payas.

The Vicentinos were more lively than the river folk, but their energies were directed to more or less the same ends ; picking enough fruit to live on, brewing *Chicha*, occasionally building a house, frequently celebrating.

They had the same fatalistic and rather cynical outlook, and gave the impression that they did not really believe in the complicated theology of good gods and bad gods, but accepted it through laziness and because it afforded numerous opportunities for celebration. In their ordinary life there was nothing of importance to distinguish them from the river tribes; they were smaller and whiter, and their houses were better built and cleaner. Apart from that, they had no more initiative. There was no sign of any creative instinct; no music, no pottery, no wood carving.

We had considerably more difficulty with the language question than we had previously found. The Vicentinos, when they found it necessary to talk at all, did so at an enormous speed, pouring out a staccato jumble of clicking consonants with no vowel sounds at all. They were more intelligent than the Zambus and picked up our sign language very quickly; but they did not understand our Zambu phrases, so we had no common ground upon which to start. In the space of a few days it was impossible to find out much of their mentality, and to discover, as we wanted, the difference made by the purity of their blood. The best we could do was to live with them and watch, and then to deduce what we could from their habits.

There was no leader to correspond to *M'tsamu* and *Tzocal*, no central patriarch who ruled the village. We asked our guide for the *Suquia*, which pleased him enormously; he pointed to his own chest with a grin, repeating, '*Suquia, Suquia.*' Later he introduced us to two other youngish men, also *Suquia*; there were three

in the village. It struck us then, for the first time, that there were no old men among the Vicentinos. We had seen no bald heads, no white hair, and the medicine men were young. It is hard to judge the age of an Indian, but certainly there was no man or woman over fifty in that village. Correspondingly there was an abundance of children, swarming everywhere and rolling naked in the sand.

The Vicentinos rarely leave the hill country. The climate is better, there are fewer mosquitoes, and there is a vague feeling among them that their gods are gods of the hills but not of the valleys. They mistrust the lowlands and have little use for those who live there. It had been a considerable effort for two of them to find us in the savanna, where they must have felt unsafe and ill at ease. For that reason we were curious to know why they had gone out of their way to find us and invite us to the village. This we managed to explain, after much complicated gesticulation. Our original guide (whose name I cannot begin to put down) told us that it was '*not good*' to stay down below the level of the hills, so we had been brought up to the village, largely for our own health. Nothing concrete was forthcoming about the perils of the valley ; it was just *very bad.*

On the third day of our stay among the Vicentinos two men came from a neighbouring village, some ten or twelve hours' travel inland. They were received as we had been, hospitably but with sedate silence. The hut in which we slept was always reserved for a

guest-house, but the Vicentinos did not think it proper to put the new arrivals in with us, so they were crowded into another hut, a large private one near our own.

The days in that village were disappointing. We had been badly spoiled, lower down the river, by our good fortune. Not only had we found Zambus and Payas without difficulty, but we had struck times, in each case, at which something out of the ordinary was in the air. Now among the Vicentinos there was nothing ; they lived from day to day, without thought or action. We had found them a little more intelligent than the darker tribes, but they were no more active or virile. The endless sequence of their existence dragged on, without event, in timeless confusion. Our first impressions of them as sinister and slightly hostile folk were badly wrong ; they were too lazy to be either.

There were, however, a few things that stood out in contrast to the other tribes. Some of the differences we noticed at once, but many of them only came to us later as we cast our minds back, from a sane distance, to those crowded days. Most immediately striking was the fact that they wore clothes. Men and women of the Payas and Zambus went naked at all times, and the idea of clothing seemed almost unknown. The Vicentinos were not by any means personally modest, according to our standards, but grown men and women both wore a sort of short skirt, half kilt and half loin-cloth. Where the difference in custom arose among kindred tribes in an enclosed territory, I do not know. One got the impression that the Vicen-

tinos wore their brief garments for comfort rather than modesty, so perhaps it came from some physical and climatical cause rather than any radical difference in point of view.

The Vicentinos led a life that was as nearly savage as one can imagine. They lived in huts and not caves, but this was from convenience rather than progress. There was no family organization, no system of tribal order at all. Centuries ago they must have been the same. Necessity has not driven them forward, for all over Mosquitia life is free, and isolation from the outside world has prevented progress from reaching them. They live an easy carefree life in a tropical Eden ; and they are extremely happy.

After four days we left them, striking a line well to the eastward so that if we were wrong in the calculation of our position we should eventually reach the Patuca, and not travel on endlessly towards Nicaragua. The two guides who had brought us to the village showed considerable reluctance at the idea of going with us into the valley, so we did not press them. From tall trees near the village it was easy to see down to the plain, and we knew fairly accurately where we were. In the very early morning while it was still cool and long shadows lay across the ground, we started off, carrying a large supply of meat and fruit. The Vicentinos gathered around us, still silent, and bade us farewell. They stood watching us until we were out of sight.

The return journey to our Patuca camp was much easier than we had thought it would be, partly because

we were fresh, partly because it was now cooler, but mostly because we had learnt the technique of travelling through tall grass without bending double, which is the natural but very tiring position to adopt. There were more snakes here than in the jungle, but our legs were well protected. Every now and again there was a hiss, a rustling in the grass, and perhaps a lightning quick ripple of warning colour. I never got over an intense and unreasonable loathing for snakes, and never failed to be very startled when I saw one underfoot. They filled us both with the instinctive revulsion that we had felt at the sight of the alligator lying near our camp, a revulsion perhaps partly of smell. The snake smell, not so strong as the alligator's musk but more offensive, was everywhere in that long stretch of grass. Fortunately they stayed on the ground.

We reached the Patuca the next morning, well before midday, and from the fact that it was already very narrow we knew that our course had not been far wrong. We turned right-handed and followed the river, walking on the long sand-banks whenever it was possible. Once we cut across the jungle for a short distance when the river made a very long bend ; then after another hour we were back at the Wampu junction.

It was a relief to be back, and to find that our stores had not been moved. We had half-buried them in sand, to protect them from baboons and alligators, and all around the camp were tracks which told us how wise this had been. We set about digging the camp free,

so as to be able to start downstream again the following morning. In the jungle nearest to us a chorus of parrots had collected. They screamed at us in fury as we dug. An iguana, as ugly as sin, waddled down to the sand and watched us from malevolent eyes, flicking its harmless forked tongue.

Our digression into the Colón mountains had been a disappointment, but at the same time it had been worth the trouble, if only to stop ourselves regretting a lost opportunity for years to come. What we had found among the Vicentinos dashed our hopes of finding anything tangible in the way of ancient Indian civilization, for obviously they were closest by blood to the pure Indian stock ; but as obviously they were already apathetic and in decay. They were as close to a vegetable existence as the Payas. It was possible that higher up in the mountains were more interesting tribes, but it was out of the question for us to go farther with our depleted supplies. Getting back to our *rendez-vous* with Robert Trapp was to be difficult enough ; our ammunition was almost gone and upon it depended the important part of our daily diet.

That night we were woken up by the *Pezoti*, which had been left behind during our time with the Vicentinos. It came in as before, silently creeping about the floor in search of food. We gave it all sorts of foods which it refused. After a few minutes it curled up by the fire to sleep. In the morning it was still there, sitting on its long haunches and watching us.

At dawn we took the boat and examined its bottom,

then floated it and loaded our things. The *Pezoti* of its own accord jumped into the boat. We pushed off the sand, jumped in, and let the current carry us lazily downstream.

Chapter Fifteen

GUARUNTA

WE drifted down the Patuca for endless hot lazy days, a journey that was a luxury cruise in comparison to the fight we had had to reach the Wampu junction. The river ran at about four miles an hour, so there was no need to do more than steer the boat to avoid rocks and shoals. On the way up we had steered with a paddle over the stern ; but now that steering was our main concern we made a rudder and mounted it on a post with the hinges from Nigel's sextant case. Every now and then we ran aground with a thud, or crashed into a patch of rocks that lay hidden under the muddy surface of the water, but the *pipanto* was enormously strong and never even sprang a leak. Sometimes a whirlpool of red water caught us, and we drifted alarmingly broadside on and then stern first, twisting around in the current ; but most of the way the Patuca lay in long bends, powerful but smooth. The water was much lower than when we had come up, leaving a jagged line of corrosion along the banks.

There was very little for us to do besides watch the river and keep an eye on the jungle in case there were unexpected signs of life. Ammunition was now far too scarce to waste, so we could not even amuse ourselves

by shooting at alligators. We spent much time in sketching and a good deal more in another abortive attempt to map the extraordinary course of the Patuca. Our maps of the river were never a success.

Since we did not have to stand up to pole the boat it was easy to shelter ourselves from the sun. We made an awning from the tarpaulin from Wampu camp and lay idly in the shade, trailing hands and feet in the water and watching the heat haze shimmering up from the land. The sun was as fierce as it had been before, but there was more wind. For most of the way downstream a gentle breeze blew up from the seaward, bringing a fresh tang that killed the sickening smell of musk lingering along the river banks. In very hot weather, and when no rain has fallen, the dank and almost fœtid odour of the jungle rises in powerful waves. It is a strange mixture; decaying vegetation, stagnant water, snakes, monkeys, and usually rotting flesh and bones. Together these make a powerful characteristic jungle smell that one cannot forget.

On the way down the river seemed quite different, and it was hard to recognize places that we had laboriously passed a fortnight before, partly because we had been too busy to pay much attention, and partly because there were few landmarks to distinguish the long even curves of the river. It seemed endless and eternally the same.

Nothing of real interest stood out in those days. We had to make an effort to find something to do, when day after day of slow drifting became tiresome. We made continual maps, took photographs, and every few

days one of us would have an energetic spell of diary-writing. But even our own efforts were half-hearted and listless. Nothing held our attention for long enough to be worth doing. We were badly infected with the tropical inertia of the Mosquito Coast, and had the current not carried us we might have spent years in collecting enough energy to reach the Lagoons again. Like lotus-eaters we drifted on without the strength even to think.

Robert Trapp had been waiting at Brauvila for very nearly a fortnight, and when we arrived he had been on the point of following us up the river, thinking that something must have happened. He was not ill pleased at having to wait, for he had spent his time in hunting alligators. A large and very strongly smelling pile of skins stood outside the shack. He was less pleased, however, at the sight of one boat returning when we had left with four. They were mostly his boats. He stared at us severely over his gold-rimmed spectacles.

Trapp had brought two large canoes full of fresh supplies for us—food and ammunition—with three Zambu boys from Brewer's Lagoon, who had since gone back in one canoe leaving the other for him. He took us proudly to the hut and showed us the pile of things he had brought. There was flour and rice, sugar, salt and coffee ; tinned milk and even butter, and a lot of quinine. In a separate pile, in neat packages, was the ammunition. He probably had great trouble in protecting it lower down the river, for

the Honduran Government is very strict about importing ammunition into Mosquitia. For the people who live there it is hard to get and expensive, and here we had a supply probably amounting to more than all the rest of the ammunition in the territory. It had been sent by air from the capital to La Ceiba, from there to the Lagoon by schooner, and now it had been laboriously brought up the Patuca by Robert Trapp. I picked up a large square package that was covered with oilskin wrapping. It was so heavy that I thought it must be ·38 revolver ammunition. Nigel had two cartridges left in his belt and I had only one, so I tore away the wrapping to get out a fresh supply before we forgot. The oilskin came away easily, then there was a layer of heavy cartridge paper and wire, and finally two thicknesses of brown paper done up with stout cord. At last the covering was off.

I could not believe my eyes ; instead of neat boxes there were books, a large pile of enormous fat volumes. Incredulously I picked them up. *Salmond on the Law of Torts*, by W. T. S. Stallybrass ; *The Institutes of Justinian ;* Cheshire's *Modern Real Property* ; and so on. We looked at each other without a word. There was no adequate remark to make. Instead of valuable ammunition we had been sent law books, as unsuitable a form of literature for the banks of the Patuca river as one can well imagine. Frantically we searched the rest of the cases. There were plenty of shot-gun shells, a box (for some reason) of signal rockets, and finally, at the very bottom, a small box of ·38 bullets. It was a relief to find them, but there were very few, and we

were disappointed that the first case had not been full of them.

In fury we turned to the books. There was no sense in keeping them, a useless dead weight, if we were going across country to the Guarunta. Disgustedly we hurled them into the river. They floated clumsily downstream, and before they were far from us we saw a ripple on the water and an alligator's jaws snapping at the *Law of Torts*. He must have been as disappointed as we were. As *Justinian* floated away Nigel in a fit of spite put a bullet through it. Cheshire ran aground on some rocks, where it remained in safety to mock us for several days. The others were whirled away by the current, to find their way into the Lagoons or possibly out to sea. They must have proved a source of enormous enlightenment to the Zambus. Robert Trapp watched us with delight, pleased at the sight of people who apparently shared his own opinion of books.

It took us a long time to find out how those books had reached us. At the end of the summer term in Oxford I had ordered them from Blackwell's ; they had followed me to Tegucigalpa, where someone had put them on an aeroplane going to La Ceiba ; and from there they had made their dogged legal way into the middle of Mosquitia by schooner and canoe. There is no getting away from the law.

Now that we were back at Trapp's *rendez-vous* it was forcibly brought home to us that our plans were extraordinarily inadequate and inefficient. We had the idea of striking off towards the Guarunta by way of a longish creek, which we had heard led to within a very

short distance of that river. But no one knew where this creek led into the Patuca, no one knew how deep it was, and most important of all no one knew where it actually went. The journey was going to depend on a succession of rather precarious chances. Robert Trapp was of no help, for his opinion from the start had been, simply, that we were mad. As a matter of policy he immediately advised against any plan that either of us suggested. And it was to be clearly understood, he pointed out, that *he* was going back to the coast by the only sane way—down the Patuca.

We rested for two days and nights at Brauvila, arranging stores and giving back to Robert the things we did not need. After that we made two short journeys up and down the river to find the exact position of the creek that was most likely to lead to the Guarunta. Our maps were useless ; even the course of the Patuca, as far as it was charted, was wildly wrong.

Finally we found the creek. It was a narrow rocky mouth, very much overgrown, and it did not give the impression of being likely to lead to anything better than a small stagnant swamp. We pushed the boat along it for an hour or so and found that it grew no worse ; so we drifted back to the camp for the supplies and decided to risk wasting time in following it to the end.

Before we left Brauvila there arrived a Zambu canoe, furiously paddled by a solitary black boy. He was one of those who had been with us many weeks earlier, when we were at the Lagoon. Now he had heard from Robert Trapp's friends on Cannon Island that we were

going across country towards Caratasca Lagoon, and he wanted to go with us. Since we were limited to one boat only I thought that he would be more of a nuisance than a help, but Trapp had taught him a little Belize English, and advised us to take the boy as an interpreter. There are a great many Zambu villages between the rivers, and we might need porters to get across country. As he was so pathetically eager to come we finally took him. There was no way we could discover of either remembering or pronouncing his Zambu name, so with singularly little originality we called him John. He was delighted and repeated the name under his breath, with varying intonations, for nearly twenty-four hours.

At an early dawn we left Brauvila, all three of us paddling hard. John paddled from the bow, chattering incessantly in Zambu dialect, occasionally bursting into song. The creek was deeper than it looked, so we did not run aground, and after an hour's work it became wider still. It looked rather as if there had at some time been a lake here. The farther we went from the Patuca the wider it grew.

This state of things was too good to last, as we knew, for there could be no reason for a continual increase in width as one drew away from the direction of flow. By midday we had reached the middle of the lake-bed, and after that it grew rapidly narrower again till our progress was far more difficult than it had been at the start. In the wide part of the creek there was an enormous quantity of game, but we had brought nothing but our revolvers. Several times in an hour

coveys of wild duck beat across the clearing in front of us and there were turkeys everywhere in the jungle flanking the creek.

The next part was dreadful, but no more so than we had expected. For five hours we went through an infuriating cycle of running aground, hitting rocks, and catching ourselves in the vines and lianas that hung down in a thick curtain overhead. In places it was almost dark, giving the impression that we were travelling through some underground tunnel. But all the rivers of hell could not be as maddening as this Honduran creek ; and we had no idea what lay at the end of it. We struggled on blindly, sweating and losing what ragged patches of temper we still had. From time to time there were colonies of horse-flies, fat black and yellow things with the sting of a red-hot needle. They were slow and one could kill them by the dozen ; but it was a waste of time. For every one killed there were a hundred more to come. We smoked furiously at native cigars till we were nearly ill. Clouds of heavy greenish smoke hung over our heads like poison gas, obscuring what dim light managed to make its way through the vegetation.

Well before dark we stopped to prepare for the night, although we were still in the thickest tangle of the jungle. There was no sign of a clearing and we were very tired. To keep the mosquitoes away seemed far more important than reaching the other river.

The night was better than we expected. Our mosquito-nets were sound, there was no sign of life on the bank, and in the flat bottom of the boat there was

plenty of room for us to lie down. It was infinitely more comfortable than some of the nights we had spent in mid-stream, on the way up the Patuca.

For all the next day it was the same, a constant fight to get along at all. The current was against us, it was infernally hot, and frequently we had to cut through the trailing vines and roots that blocked the creek in grotesque entanglements. We were worn out and ragged with exertion.

On the morning after that we gave it up. Hitherto it had been difficult enough, but now suddenly there were enormous rocks and boulders strewn in the creek, making further travel by water quite impossible. We dragged the boat up into the edge of the jungle.

The question was now to fix a course across country which would ultimately bring us to the Guarunta or one of its tributaries. Neither of us had any idea of the direction we had taken in following the creek, so we decided to take a line much farther to the east than would probably be necessary. It was obviously preferable to prolong the temporary unpleasantness of travelling overland rather than take the chance of missing even the headwaters of the Guarunta and wandering for ever on into the jungle.

We asked John what he thought about it and he answered at great length. At first we did not understand what he said, but when he repeated it we realized how idiotic we had been not to think of it before. Robert Trapp had said there were Zambus in this

country, living in dozens of villages scattered near the rivers and creeks. John now proposed to find a Zambu tribe, to ask the direction of the Guarunta, and if possible to get them to help with the portage. It was not likely, we thought, to be more than ten or twelve miles to the next water.

John ran off into the jungle, making his way effortlessly through it in the native fashion. We had no idea how he was to set about finding a village : but he was confident, and they were his people.

Nigel and I settled down in the shade to wait for him. There was nothing we could do ; and if he was unsuccessful it was doubtful whether we should be able to go on alone. We had expected to find savanna grass before having to leave the river, and we were equipped with *machetes* to cut it down. But the thickness of the jungle itself was too much for us. Neither of us was experienced, and it was too difficult to keep a straight course. Everything depended now upon John's success with the Zambus.

Before he came back it was late afternoon and Nigel and I had each slept for three hours in the shade of the *pipanto*.

In the distant jungle we heard chattering and laughing and the heavy rustling of undergrowth. John had evidently found Zambus and was on his way back. After a few minutes he appeared, beaming and radiant with pride. Behind him came the Zambus—twelve strapping women, jet black and as naked as the day they were born. They gathered around us in a

friendly noisy circle, staring and shrieking remarks to each other. Zambus always seem to talk at the top of their voices. This was not exactly what we had expected, but there was no reason why women should not carry for us as efficiently as men. Most of them were bigger and stronger. They sat down on the sandy ground and we had lunch—Nigel and I, John, and the twelve black women. After everyone had eaten enough, which took a long time, we set about talking business. They would carry for us, cut through the grass and lead us to the Guarunta ; and in return we would give them a quantity of bar salt. John transacted the business with surprising intelligence. We passed cigarettes around and sat in silence listening to the Zambu chatter. Most of the women talked at once and very few listened to anything that was said. Their thick lips were never still, for our presence had worked them up into a fine state of curiosity and excitement. The noise they made effectively drowned all the animal sounds of the jungle.

Before dark the women went away again, back to their people ; they were to return to us at dawn, and we would start at once for the Guarunta. The jungle seemed suddenly very quiet and peaceful.

The idea of starting at dawn was unduly optimistic. The women did not arrive till after seven, and it was nearly a full hour after that before they had organized themselves and had stopped talking enough to make a start possible. We set off with a great flourish. The six women in front had *machetes* with which they cut down the sharp grass ; following them four more

carried the boat, and the supplies were divided between the other two women and ourselves. John came last, carrying nothing but the *Pezoti*, which had transferred its loyalty to him.

I do not think that there can ever have been such a noisy expedition anywhere in the world. After several hours Nigel and I were sweating and panting, but the women pushed on without a pause, shouting and laughing all the time. A bank-holiday excursion to Blackpool would have been funereal compared to this riotous party, crashing nonchalantly through the jungle. We had no idea what most of the laughter was about, but it was infectious, and the sight of those twelve fat black women sent us into fits of laughter too. We laughed at them and they laughed at us. It was a mad day.

At about midday we stopped to rest and to have an enormous meal. It was too much trouble to cook anything, so we ate fruit and tinned foods. Eating was the one thing that seemed successful in keeping the Zambu women quiet. After lunch we all smoked native cigars to keep the flies away.

Before nightfall we struck water, a narrow rocky brook running away from us, and with relief we followed it till it grew wide enough to float the boat. With considerably more relief we paid off the women, who were by this time almost hysterical, and they made their way back into the jungle.

The next morning we started to drift down the stream. It flowed slowly, far more sluggishly than the tributaries of the Patuca, but there were less rocks.

The whole character of the country was changing; where the Patuca bed had been of sand and great rocks, here was nothing but black mud, thick and treacherous. When we had to step overboard to push the *pipanto* off a shoal, our feet sank, squelchingly, into evil-smelling slime. The jungle, too, was changing. Somehow it seemed more poisonous, more stagnantly fertile. The rocky clearings and stretches of sand that we had found in the Patuca jungle were gone; now there was nothing but a solid mass of grotesque vegetation, vivid green and black. It was so thick that everything lay damp and dripping, rarely touched by the sun. We hurried on, anxious to reach the main river and more open ground. An odour of decay hung faintly in the hot air.

The evening found us depressed and a little discouraged. We were travelling at a fair speed, considering the conditions, but there was an unhealthy atmosphere in the jungle that made us wish we had stuck to the Patuca. Just before we stopped for the night we ran under a cluster of thick tendrils that hung from the overhanging trees. We had grown tired of watching the jungle and our attention was relaxed. As the bow of the boat passed under the long branches a cry came from John, who had for some time been quite silent. We looked up and saw a snake hanging downwards to within a few feet of the boat. I fired quickly at it but missed, and in a flash it was gone; but in that brief glimpse we had seen what it was—a young boa-constrictor. They are rare in Central America, and small in comparison to those of Africa. Nevertheless it rather

added to our low spirits. Although not really dangerous it was revolting and seemed symbolical of the new fœtid jungle we had reached. We redoubled our efforts to be clear of the place.

We spent another night in the creek, vainly trying to shake off our sudden attack of gloom. John, accustomed as he was to the Mosquito jungle, was silent, and stared about with preoccupied apprehensive eyes. There were new noises here, added to the usual jungle chorus, strange sounds we could not place. The black edges of the forest seemed immensely close, vast walls that enclosed us impenetrably. The air of tropical gloom is hard to describe, for it came from a dozen causes, of sense and smell and sound. None of us slept very much.

Very early in the morning we cast off and set to paddling furiously downstream, eager to get away from that indefinable atmosphere of poison and decay. It was unreasonable; the physical discomforts were no worse than they had been in other parts of the jungle. But we had an instinctive urge, far stronger than reason, that drove us to paddle on without a stop.

By the time the sun was high overhead the creek was wider and hot rays beat through the jungle upon us. Until now we had always done our best to avoid the sun, resting in the shade at noon and using considerable ingenuity in erecting awnings. After the darkness of the last days it was welcome. With the sun our spirits rose and we came to life. Reaching the Guarunta and Caratasca Lagoon became matters of excited interest

again, and we speculated foolishly about what we should find.

At about half-past three, when we least expected it, we heard the sound of water breaking around rocks, and before long we were at the junction. Running across our creek was a larger river, rocky and fast. At the point where the waters met there was a rough whirlpool of clear water. We had reached the Guarunta.

Chapter Sixteen

TOACAS

WE very nearly overturned the boat at the junction, where the converging currents ran strong and fast. But it was only a forewarning of what was to come lower down the river. There was no question of paddling; the stream took us lurchingly along, far faster than was safe. It took all our combined efforts to steer the boat and avoid the rocks. John fortunately was an excellent waterman. He knew the best ways of shooting rapids and he had had experience with *pipantos* since he was born. At first the Guarunta carried us on so fast that we had no time to clear away the cobwebs of laziness that had grown over our minds during the slow days of travel from the Patuca, and it was only by chance that we did not lose the boat. After that first shock we were more alert, watching every ripple on the water and sitting the boat carefully.

Again there was a sudden change in the jungle, so vivid that it struck one immediately. The Guarunta was heavily overgrown, like its tributaries; but the deadly atmosphere of tropical decay had vanished. There was a new beauty in the foliage and in the undergrowth that we had not seen on the Patuca. Everywhere there was a riot of fantastic colour break-

ing through the green background, and the water was clear ; along the Patuca the banks were sombre, dark hues of green and grey standing out solidly over dirty red water. It seemed, too, that here there was more animal life. Whenever one looked ashore there was movement ; emerald-green lizards, parrots, iguanas, cranes, and a Greek chorus of white-faced monkeys swinging through the jungle. The forest was thicker, if anything, but it gave an impression of healthy fertility, and cool breezes blew up from the sea. We shot along with the current, doing what we could to hold the boat back. To lose it or to stove in its bottom would be disastrous. At times there were rapids too swift to be taken in our stride, and we had to lower the boat laboriously across them by means of ropes. Those days of fast travel down the Guarunta were probably the best we had during our time in Mosquitia. It was easy, it was exciting, and we were successful in our original plan. It was well worth the days of depression and discouragement we had gone through in making our way across from the Patuca.

The nights were more difficult. Now the stream was far too strong for us to sleep afloat in the boat, and it was hard to find clear places on the river banks. We made the best of it, usually stopping two hours or more before dark ; but the first few nights were bad. Luckily the exertion of keeping the boat on her course down the river, dodging rocks all day and continually keeping alert, made us tired, and we slept fairly soundly under all sorts of conditions.

The course of the river was devious, never straight

and always very rocky. Usually we could not see far ahead, and occasionally the boat was whirled round a sharp bend on to a patch of rocks.

Along both banks ran a wide band of corrosion, where the water-level during the annual flood season had eaten into the land, and in the damp honeycombs of this lived enormous frogs and toads and great black spiders. As we passed noisily they scuttled back into the wet earth. On shore there was always plenty to entertain us during the few spare moments in which we could snatch our attention from the river. Those were very full days.

On the third day, suddenly, we came upon another boat. Rounding a bend in the river we narrowly escaped running down a large *cayuka* carrying four Zambu men. In the boat was the carcase of a deer, four turkeys and a handful of smaller birds. The Zambus were laboriously poling and paddling upstream, and the sight of our boat disconcerted them so much that they lost control and the *cayuka* swung round, stern to the current. In wide-eyed astonishment they stared at us while John shrieked a Zambu explanation. But it took some time to conquer their alarm.

We must have been a dreadful sight ; neither Nigel nor I had shaved for over a month now, and our clothes were certainly not in keeping with whatever ideas they might have of what white men's clothes should be. Nigel had a very battered felt hat, which upon more than one occasion had been used to

In the Colón Mountains

filter our drinking water; I had lost mine several weeks before and since then had been wearing a rather unorthodox cap made of large palm leaves. Both of us were nearly black from the constant sun. We must have made a very poor picture of white men.

We went in to the shore and tied up close to their boat. John asked where they lived. They pointed upstream; their village was just around the second bend, and we must have passed close to it a few minutes earlier. After giving this information to John in dialect they looked at us and shrieked it out again at the top of their voices, presumably to make it easier for us to understand. They waved fists and paddles upstream, pointing to us and pointing towards their village. We told John to tell them that we would like to come up with them to see their people. All four of them broke out, at once, into radiant smiles. The Mosquito Indians were all immediately hospitable.

We had thought that these river folk were Zambus, like those of the lower Patuca, but John told us that they were Secos. There was little outward difference. Both tribes were very dark, well built and thick set; and both had about the same mixture of Negro and Indian blood. The village stood a little way back in the jungle, half-hidden by trees, and even had we not been so busy at the time we shot past the place we might have missed it.

The first thing we noticed in the Seco village was that it was vastly superior to any we had seen before.

It was solid and clean ; and instead of rough palm-leaf huts they had tall gabled huts built upon piles of great red mahogany. The forest all around the Guarunta contains enormous mahogany stands, and it is used for every purpose by the Indians.

We stepped ashore with presents of salt and tobacco. From all over the village and from the jungle's edge the Secos came running to meet us. They were not so unaccustomed to foreigners as the other tribes, for during the last decade several prospectors had been seen, and recently timber-cruisers had made their way across the Nicaraguan border in search of mahogany. They greeted us with enthusiasm. Our time was running very short and it was vital that we should reach Caratasca Lagoon in time to meet Captain Macdonald. If we were not there at the *rendez-vous* when the *Perla del Mar* reached the bar, he had warned us that he could not afford to wait ; so we decided not to stay with the Zambus. They seemed very disappointed, but John explained as well as he could. It was really quite beyond even him to understand why anyone should be in a hurry at any time.

A day was all that it was really safe to spare. There was no time for us to make elaborate comparisons between Secos and Payas, or to investigate their family organization. In any case we were very tired of asking continual questions, and it was only as a matter of conscience that we had done so before. There seems to me no reason why it is not just as rude to inquire into intimate details in Mosquitia as it would be to do so in London. Primitive Indians are proud and sensitive

people, and to turn their country into a zoo was inexcusable. Curiosity, too, seemed slightly invidious when there were possibly twenty thousand of them and only two of us. On several occasions when we had been with the tribes along the Patuca we had moments of uneasiness on account of our minority, when the flow of curiosity and investigation seemed to be going the wrong way. It was like a nightmare in which one is, suddenly, a goldfish in a bowl. Now we decided to ask nothing, to live and behave as they did. This policy was immediately successful. We were white, they saw, and we came with strange things from far away: but we sat and ate with them, a Zambu travelled with us, and we showed no surprise at them. They treated us as equals.

The Secos live low down, near the river and on the edge of the great swampy coastal plane that follows the line of the Caribbean. It is the edge of the banana land, with well-watered sandy soil, and their main diet is composed of bananas and the numberless different kinds of rather tasteless plantains that grow among them. There was considerably more initiative showing here than up the river. The fruit was planted, instead of growing wild. The Zambus sometimes pick fruit that grows an hour's journey away from their village, when there is perfect soil around them; there is never enough energy for anyone to undertake the enterprise of planting.

An enormous meal was prepared when we arrived, and special delicacies came from the huts and from the jungle. The Secos had wooden platters and mugs of

mahogany. We sat under a canopy of broad leaves, the Indians in a circle on each side of us. They produced course after course: bananas and plantains, fried and boiled and baked; bitter red berries from the forest, and fresh turkey meat smothered in fierce red pepper; avocados, limes, and a succession of pulpy vegetables we did not know. At first we had been afraid that there would be *Waboul* and *Wawеen*, the twin staples of Zambu cooking. They are made from rotting bananas, after a number of complicated and rather dirty processes. We had faced them with great fortitude in *M'tsamu's* village. It could not be done again. Luckily the crisis did not arise.

When the meal was over we passed cigarettes to the Secos. They took them eagerly, for although it was impossible for them to get a supply, a few of them had smoked cigarettes which had been given to them in the past. The reputation of white man's tobacco was enormous—compared to the black leaves grown in Mosquitia any European tobacco would have tasted wonderful. In spite of their excitement not one of the Secos ever asked for anything from us; begging was apparently one of the things forbidden by the rigid rules of Indian manners. When we left we gave them all the Tegucigalpa cigars we could spare, with raw leaf tobacco and Honduran cigarettes.

In the village there was one communal possession of enormous worth, which distinguished the owners from all other Secos. It was a very old ·12 bore shot-gun, with single action hammers and a thick coating of

rust. They showed it to us with pride. It was interesting, they thought, and obviously very valuable ; but unfortunately it was now twelve years since there had been any ammunition. Since that time none of the few stray arm-bearing folk who had been along the Guarunta had happened to have suitable cartridges to spare. I looked at the barrels. Once it had been a fine gun, in the distant past. Now it was half-full of rust and dirt, and some misadventure or piece of primitive engineering had caused a deflection of several degrees in the middle of the barrels ; if it was fired it would very soon explode. Reluctantly we regretted that we had no ·12 bore ammunition with us. Even apart from the condition of the gun it would have been a doubtful piece of kindness to give them ammunition. We never fired a shot ourselves when we were with any of the tribes. They were happy enough as they were, safe and weaponless. There is nothing more immediately and compellingly attractive to even a peaceful primitive mind than a firearm.

We got on very well indeed with the Secos, perhaps because they were a superior tribe, perhaps entirely on account of our policy of non-inquisitiveness. If there had been the slightest excuse we should have stayed longer. There were a dozen things I should have liked to know : for instance, how were the mahogany piles driven into the earth to support the houses? The principle of a mechanical pile-driver seemed far too advanced for these people ; yet the piles were long and heavy, well driven into the ground. For most of the day I was absorbed in spite of myself in providing

answers for this question. Finally I satisfied my curiosity by telling John to ask one of the Secos, privately, as a matter of inter-tribal interest. He did not understand at first, but finally realized what I wanted to know. While Nigel and I continued making clumsy signs of friendliness to the others he wandered off and talked to a group of boys. The answer was disappointing. They dug an enormous hole where the house was to be, erected the posts, then filled the hole in again with earth and stones, stamping it down carefully until the level of the floor was reached. A laborious process and slow, but their houses were very solid.

In the evening an old woman, wrinkled and bent double, came to us and told John a long tale of a 'doctor' who had been up the Guarunta many years ago when she was still quite young. He was a Honduran, and with an enormous supply of quinine he had travelled for a long way among the Secos prescribing it as a universal remedy, and selling small bottles for gold dust. They had been glad to have it; fever is common and in one way and another they had acquired a taste for it. But the 'doctor' had never come back, and since then they had been unable to get any more quinine. A lot of the older folk remembered it well, and would be only too willing to give a few mere handfuls of gold dust for a bottle or so. . . .

Back in Tegucigalpa we made inquiries. It was a profitable swindle, and we were not surprised to find that it had been tried again, more recently. The

'doctor,' oddly enough, was our old friend from The Road. It had probably made him a small fortune.

When we pushed off again into the Guarunta, it was with regret; on our way home, when we were really pressed for time, we had stumbled upon the best tribe of all. They made us promise to come back.

For the rest of the journey the river grew steadily wider and more difficult. We were continually in danger of upsetting the boat. Several times we shipped a lot of water, and John had to bail most of the day.

As we drew nearer and nearer to the coast the mahogany stands increased. All along the river stood groups of tall trees, worth a fortune to anyone who could transport them to civilization.

Two days later came disaster. Rounding a sharp bend we shot suddenly over some rapids that had been hidden from us by the jungle. After a sickening lurch and a grinding noise that sounded as if the bottom of the boat had gone, we overturned. Nigel, John and I were thrown almost head first on to the rocks. Everything in the boat fell out; the heavier things sank into the rough water just below the rapids, and were carried slowly downstream. All the light articles, invaluable odds and ends, disappeared at once and were thrown quickly into the vortex of boiling waters below. The boat turned over completely, then the stream took it bodily off the rocks and it drifted downstream, bottom

up. By the time we had collected our wits it was out of sight round the next curve.

For a moment we stood ruefully in the water, staring stupidly at the rocks. A bag of flour had burst open and was spreading its contents upon the waters. It was hard work to stand in the current. We made a pile, on the bank, of the things we rescued—a few tins of food, a primus stove and some fuel, some ammunition, and our mosquito-nets. Nothing, however, was of any importance compared to the boat. While Nigel and John salvaged what they could from the river, I waded downstream after the boat. It was upside down, and with luck it would have caught up on the rocks or against the bank not far below us. Actually it was an hour before I caught it. I made it fast to a tree and then went upstream again to Nigel.

They had managed to find practically nothing more. Nearly all our food was lost or ruined, both the shotguns were missing, and there was no sign of our first-aid outfit to attend to Nigel's head, which was cut open and bleeding. Worse still our cameras were gone, with all the films we had taken during the last seven weeks. The pathetic pile of things we had saved stood on the sand at the edge of the water. We had enough to get us back safely ; but it was infuriating at this stage to lose everything, worst of all the best photographs. We decided to spend the rest of the day searching the river-bed among the rocks, and to stay here for the night.

All the rest of that day we toiled wearily, standing

waist-deep in swirling water, feeling in the mud with bare toes and occasionally diving down to look through the opaque river water. It was hard to stand up, so that one had to fight continually to keep a footing in the slime. Every now and again one of us would be bowled over and carried joltingly downstream. It was useless; the only thing of real importance that we found was one of the compasses.

Disgusted and tired, we flayed about in the water until nearly sundown, then pitched a rough camp on the sand and went to sleep. That was a bad day.

The morning found us heavy-eyed with sleep and thoroughly bad-tempered. The strain of standing braced against the current for so many hours the day before had made us stiff and our backs ached painfully. Even John was quiet and thoughtful. But there was no use in staying longer; if we had not found more already, there was little chance of doing so. We divided the load of gear we had and started splashing downstream to where I had moored the boat. With our burdens it was even more difficult to walk in the water than it had been for me the day before, but the jungle walled us in, thicker than ever. Even at the edge of the river the water swirled down in a fast-running torrent, and with it came sticks and rocks and broken pieces of timber that crashed into our backs and added considerably to the pleasures of the journey. By the time we reached the *pipanto* we were dead-tired and sick with exasperation.

That was the last real accident, and as if realizing that our tempers had been overtaxed the river became, for a few hours, strangely calm and docile. Those hours followed immediately upon our regaining the boat; they did much to restore our flagging spirits. The pleasant interlude, however, was not to last, and we were shaken from rest by a sudden jar. Rocks in the river had been replaced by sand-banks; we were aground again, held fast in soft yielding sand. When I tried to step overboard I sank knee-deep in quicksand.

The rest of the Guarunta was tiresome, and the journey consisted of alternately ramming rocks and running aground. The boat by this time leaked badly. John bailed endlessly with an empty food tin.

Later on we missed an opportunity of investigating something that may have been of considerable interest. We had been drifting lazily, steering the *pipanto* automatically. It was intensely hot, and our minds were wandering far from the Mosquito Coast. Rather suddenly the river narrowed and we were jerked roughly from our day-dreams to keep the boat upright across a stretch of rock-strewn water. As before, we were taken by surprise; the current swirled around us and brought the boat broadside on to the stream. For a few seconds we worked desperately with paddles and poles, and then it was over, and we were through into calmer water. But in that brief moment, as we lingered between air and water, something on the bank had caught my eye. The regular mass of the jungle was

broken, rather in colour than in line. I snatched a hurried moment to look back over my shoulder. There, on the left bank, was a stone wall. It was half-hidden by the jungle, and from the cracks in the stone sprang weeds and twisted tendrils. In the course of time the stonework had become camouflaged, almost disguised, by a parasite layer of moss and fungus, but there was no possible doubt that it was a man-made wall. The level grey surface stood out conspicuously, once it had caught the eye, in spite of the thick growth of vegetation.

I shouted to Nigel, too late. Below the rocks we had just been through the water was fairly calm but it ran fast, and we were swirled away out of sight almost at once. To stop now would have been very difficult and might have meant overturning again. With our very depleted supplies we wanted to take no risks ; time was already dangerously short. The thought of finding ourselves stranded for a fortnight or so at Caratasca Lagoon, until Macdonald saw fit to call again, drove us to hurry on and ignore the anthropological possibilities of the Guarunta. Regretfully we drifted on without stopping.

For a long time we speculated on what we might have found had we stopped. It was certainly very ancient stonework, as none of the modern Mosquito Indians have the mechanical cunning to use stone for building. From the brief glimpse I had caught of it, it looked well built and solid with a length along the river's edge of twenty-five or thirty feet. I guessed that it must have been five or six feet high : certainly no

more. It was impossible to see what happened at the ends of the wall—whether they turned at right angles to form a square enclosure, or whether it stood as it was, simply a straight breastwork of stone. It was maddening to have to leave it, but the last accident had handicapped us badly, and to take chances with the river at this stage would have been very rash. John seemed surprised that we should be at all interested in whatever it was I had seen on the bank, and he told us that away to the east near Ebony Lagoon, which lies next to Brewer's, there were several such things. The Zambus knew of them, but kept away ; they were built by ancient people who must have been wizards, and accordingly the hand of the *Mafia* was still upon them. John was half-educated from his long association with Robert Trapp's Belize negroes on Cannon Island ; but he showed enormous relief at our decision not to stop.

For a long time after that we drifted uneventfully down the twisting Guarunta, now watching the river banks with more care. There were no more signs of ancient habitation, nothing but the endless grey-green walls of foliage and undergrowth. John told us that in these parts, too, were many Indian villages. He had never been on the Guarunta before but nevertheless, he said, he could tell. There were no signs that were visible to us. It would have been well worth while, with an extra two months to spare and proper equipment, to explore the Guarunta country thoroughly, for it shows signs of being more interesting than the territory we had seen along the Patuca. We were badly

handicapped by time, even worse by lack of food and ammunition ; there was nothing to do now but make straight for Caratasca, taking every precaution we could.

Chapter Seventeen

RIBRA

LOWER down the river we ran into jungle that was alive on every side, swarming with black folk and their smoky villages. Now we were nearer to the fringes of civilization, and gradually there appeared those fingers of progress that always reach the farthest —a few cigarettes, an occasional bottle of rum, and most important of all, firearms. The Indians from Caratasca Lagoon and the lower Guarunta are mixed ; some Zambus, some Secos and a few who call themselves Toacas. There is little obvious difference between the three tribes.

We found, here, that white men were no novelty, and were objects of interest only as possible sources of tobacco. Caratasca is well known to the bandits and revolutionaries of the Nicaraguan border, and once in a while a little Government cutter steams up to the Caratasca Bar to watch for signs of gun-running across the frontier. Prospectors and timber men have been here, mostly to be defeated by the Mosquito jungle. There is no doubt that fortunes lie half-hidden in Mosquitia, in gold mines and mahogany, but to extricate the riches of the country is another matter. Enormous barriers of red tape are erected by the Government, the combinations of climate and fever do much to dis-

courage commercial ambitions, and as a final obstacle there is no local labour obtainable. The Indians of the river have no use for work or money, except in a rather exaggerated ratio. They are eager for tobacco and salt and a few other things that can easily be brought for payment ; but their love of eternal leisure is usually more powerful still. One would be lucky to hire an Indian for eight shillings a day. From time to time enterprising Europeans and Americans try to mine some of the Mosquito Coast's enormous riches ; but these things always defeat their enterprise. Even the forests of great red mahogany remain undisturbed.

There was very little for us to do here among the lower river folk, and in any case we had no time to spare. The native simplicity of the up-river tribes had gone, destroyed by their occasional contacts with the half-civilization of the Honduran coast. They were amusing, but there was not the frank charm of the Payas. We stopped whenever we passed a village to barter salt for meat and fruit. A few glimpses of civilization stood out, grotesquely, against their simple background of instinct.

Still several days from the Lagoon, our food ran out completely. Lately we had been unable to find fruit, and there had been no villages along the banks. It was almost impossible to kill game without a shot-gun, although we made one or two rather hopeless attempts to bring down a duck or wild turkey with our revolvers. There was nothing left in the boat but tobacco and a few bars of salt.

For a day and a night, no great hardship, we had

nothing to eat; and on the following morning we reached a village at about eleven o'clock. It was enormous, far the largest native settlement we had yet seen. Far into the jungle there straggled untidy thatched huts, and over the whole place lingered the acrid smoke of many wood fires.

As we pulled in to the shore three women ran down to the river bank to meet us. At once the difference between these Indians and those inland was obvious. They wore rough dresses of cheap printed calico, traded from one of the coastal schooners. As we nosed into the bank they reached down and pulled the *pipanto* up on the sand-bank.

In the village there was an abundance of fruit, but unfortunately a great scarcity of meat. The hunters had not been out recently and all the game had long since been driven away from the neighbourhood of the huts; Indians can live happily on fruit and vegetables, regarding occasional meat as a luxury rather than a staple diet. There was one man in the village, the women told us, who was the best hunter in Mosquitia, and if we wanted meat perhaps we might go inland with him on a shooting expedition. They led us to his hut. In a long hammock slung across the hut lay an enormous Zambu, who wore a pair of tight white cotton trousers and nothing else. We stood watching him for a moment as he snored and the rippling muscles of his naked torso rose and fell rhythmically. One of the women prodded him in the ribs and let out an unexpected ear-splitting shriek of 'Jones!'

Jones sat up and rubbed his eyes, blinked at us and

climbed out of the hammock. A great smile spread over his face and he at once embarked, in Belize English, upon a lengthy story of his life. He had assumed the name of Jones, he told us, to show that he was properly educated and was not an ordinary river Indian. Up in Belize or somewhere along the Lagoons he had first heard the name, and he had always fancied it. . . .

When he had finished we told him we wanted him to go with us to shoot in the jungle and he was delighted. From a hook on the wall he took a gun and showed it to us with pride. It was an ancient shot-gun, single-barrelled, with a flamboyantly decorated hammer that projected several inches above the stock. I think it was too old to be of any recognized bore, but Jones had a technique of his own for manufacturing ammunition. He had some old cartridge-cases that were the right size, and these he loaded with the powder from new ·12 bore cartridges. Ordinary shot he never used, for with ammunition as scarce and expensive as it was in Mosquitia it was too risky a way of killing wildfowl. Instead he filled the wide barrel with a quantity of rusty tacks and nails, wadding it down from the muzzle with coconut fibre. With a certain amount of justifiable apprehension we watched a demonstration of this alarming piece of ballistics.

Jones put on his leather snake boots, slung a bandolier with more nails and a powder horn around his neck, and we were off, following him closely into the black thickness of the jungle.

He had told us, and we already knew, that all wild life had been driven from the bush around the village.

We expected a longish trek, but nothing like what we actually got. After three hours we were nowhere ; the jungle was solid and dense. Then, suddenly, it cleared, and we stood slightly dazzled by the sun on the edge of a mangrove swamp. Here, Jones whispered dramatically, was the best duck shooting in all the world. We remembered his shot-gun and decided to keep well away when anything was seen.

With infinite caution Jones worked his way out into the swamp, warning us to stay where we were at the edge. He thought there might be Muscovia sitting a little way in front of us and he did not want to frighten them away. From the edge of the solid ground we watched him wade out, sinking deep into the slime and leaving a great track of bubbling holes behind him. A faint odour of decay lingered over the swamp. When he was about twenty yards from us he stopped dead in his tracks and made frantic signs, pointing off to the right. We moved slightly to get a clear view, and there, on a solitary island of rock, sat a very fat turkey, fluffing her heavy feathers and watching us with a beady eye.

Meanwhile Jones waded with an increased squelching noise off to the left so as not to frighten his game. Gradually he came around again, laboriously moving his feet in an attempt at silence. When he was about five yards from the turkey his gun came up to his shoulder, there was a sudden flash and an immense roar, and Jones was impenetrably shrouded in smoke. For a few minutes we saw neither him nor the turkey, then the black smoke began to drift heavily away, and

the air was filled instead with floating brown feathers, as if someone on an imaginary floor above had been shaking a rather leaky eiderdown out of the window. Of the turkey there was nothing to be seen, but presently Jones ran triumphantly towards the rock where it had been sitting and collected some scattered fragments of meat. Holding them up proudly he squelched back to us, with feathers in his kinky black hair and slime up to his knees, overjoyed at having justified his reputation as a hunter. In Mosquitia very few cartridges are fired that do not reach their mark ; they are too precious. No nonsense about sporting shots is ever allowed to mar one's chances of fresh meat.

After the turkey we went on, interminably, through swampy jungle, while Jones examined tracks and bruised leaves. From time to time he announced that we were near wild boar, or deer, or that a jaguar had passed the day before. Whenever we came across padmarks we stopped while Jones inspected them at great length. On the way we shot two more turkeys and a small bird rather like a moorhen, that was successfully reduced to mincemeat by the blunderbuss. We tied them to trees, high off the ground, and left them to collect on our way back. In time Nigel and I became rather bored with staring endlessly at old tracks, but the jungle was more open now and there was plenty of other life to watch. In the dry places there were tarantulas, scuttling away at our approach and waving fanged tails over their backs ; in the trees baboons, howling and chattering at us ; and the air was thick with large birds. High in the sky, so that one could

only see them as black pin-points in the depth of the blue, there hovered vultures, watching and waiting for death on the earth to feed them. Once on the Patuca I had brought down a duck which floated off out of reach ; out of nowhere there suddenly swooped a vulture which seized the duck in its curved yellow beak, and before it had started to eat there were six more of them, sinister black ghouls that dropped from the sky. All over tropical America they hover, eternally, watching every inch of open ground for prey. Usually they keep at roughly the same level, and as soon as one drops to earth the others follow.

Lower than the vultures lived multitudes of enormous brightly coloured birds—cranes and storks, and strange marabou with long legs bent to an incredible right angle. Many of them we did not know. All day they flapped about, lumbering along just above the tops of the trees. If at times, surprising as it may seem, we could have forgotten that we were in the heart of tropical jungle, the great birds would have been the first thing to bring us back to reality. They were enormous and fantastic, like things from a child's dream of fairyland.

While we looked about us Jones had quickened his pace and seemed suddenly to have an objective. We asked him what he had found, and he whispered that we were following fresh deer tracks. Silently we followed a little way behind him, doing our best to walk as noiselessly as he did. Luckily the wind was towards us. Once we stopped for a moment while extra scrap-iron shrapnel was poured into the muzzle of the gun.

By this time it seemed to me that Providence had

been tempted far enough. Jones had accurately discharged his infernal machine altogether five times, and there was little reason to suppose that this sort of thing could go on indefinitely without the gun's blowing up. Now he had loaded it with an extra charge, and had poured into the muzzle about twice as many nails as before. We were relieved when he asked us to wait while he went on ; there was a water-hole a little way ahead and he thought the deer might be there. The brush was too thick for us to see far in front so we sat under a tree to wait.

Almost immediately came an explosion, an enormous report that sent birds for miles around high into the sky, where they wheeled and soared in terror. The baboons set up a raucous chattering chorus and began to swing away through the branches. Nigel and I ran on in the direction Jones had taken, and soon found him standing at the water-hole. On the ground lay a good-sized deer with its head practically blown off. Whatever criticisms one might level at Jones and his musketry, he was certainly an excellent stalker. The deer had been shot at almost point-blank range. We cut it open and cleaned it, and slung it across two poles to carry it back.

On the way home Jones was so exalted by his successful shooting that he lost the way. Nigel and I had as a matter of course been following him, and paying little attention to our track. Now Jones confessed that he had gone astray and that the misfortune must have happened quite a long way back. We had not yet reached the trees where the turkeys had been hung.

There was nothing for it but to turn and retrace our steps as we had come, for although we should sooner or later reach the Guarunta by carrying straight on as we were, the turkeys had been the main objective of the expedition and we refused to go without them.

As the sun fell below the rim of the earth it grew quickly cool, and in that moment of waiting between light and the sudden darkness of the tropics, we reached the clump of trees in which hung the turkeys. We were a very long way from the river and the village, and in a few minutes it would be night. Since turning back we had almost lost ourselves again, and what faith we had felt in Jones was now gone. We slung the fat carcases of the wild turkeys across the dead deer. For a few minutes we stood undecided, arguing as to what should be done. We had no light and there was no moon, so to go on in the dark was almost impossible and certainly a considerable risk. On the other hand we had no mosquito-nets, and there remained firmly implanted in our minds the painful memories of the last night we had spent unprotected in the open. Jones did not mind what we did ; he was willing to do what we wanted, and I suspect that it was by no means the first time he had lost his way. He seemed neither surprised nor sorry. Finally we decided to stay. As we finished heaping up piles of leaves and brushwood for a fire the night fell, abruptly, like a dark blanket over the jungle.

It turned out that we were fairly comfortable, for the mosquitoes here were fewer than they had been on the Patuca and the three fires that enclosed us did much

to keep them away. There was not a breath of moving air. The thick smoke curled up in heavy spiral columns, and we could see that when it reached the top of the jungle light airs caught it and it was wafted away towards the river. We took turns in sitting awake, keeping watch and feeding the fires. All around us was the drumming beat of the cicadas, a background for the strange voices of the jungle. I do not think that any of us slept very much, although we were quite comfortable and very tired.

Shortly after midnight a loud roar brought us to our feet, suddenly wide awake. It came from close at hand, in the jungle that fringed the clearing ; but from which side ? A second later it came again, then again louder and closer. It was impossible to place it. Jones threw himself down again with a laugh. '*Araguato*,' he said, ' monkey imitate jaguar.'

The howling monkey kept up his life-like mimicry at intervals all through the night, and had a real jaguar arrived we should certainly not have known the difference. It was a nerve-racking sound, and although we knew that it was only a howling monkey, it kept us for some reason keyed up and tense. The darkness hid it safely from us, and it continually shifted its position, roaring first from one side and then the other. We ground our teeth and put one or two bad-tempered revolver shots into the trees. The monkey, provoked, only roared louder and louder. Fitfully we turned over and slept in a troubled doze.

Dawn found us unaccountably in high spirits. We

had not slept much, but it was at least a relief to be rid of the *Araguato*. We cooked part of the deer and ate it savagely, washed down with clear spring water that was nectar after the muddy river. Jones filled his shot-gun with the remaining ammunition, as he said the early morning was the best time for shooting in the jungle and one never knew what might be around the corner. He laid it carefully against a tree, muzzle in the sand, while we went across to the water-hole to bathe. We stripped and lay in the clear water, and there was suddenly perfect peace as its calm coolness soaked into us and eased our mosquito-bites. The discomforts of travel in the jungle seemed very unimportant, banished by this moment of physical joy.

When we were dry and clothed we walked noisily back towards the clearing where we had spent the night. Nigel was in front, myself second, and Jones last. As Nigel stepped into the clear ground he suddenly stopped dead and stood quite still. I looked over his shoulder and saw what had startled him ; a jaguar, not very big, standing over the carcase of the deer. Neither of us had our revolvers on us and Jones had left his gun leaning against a tree on the far side, beyond the jaguar. There was very little chance of getting a shot at it. All at once it went rigid, every muscle tense ; for a brief second a pair of great yellow cat's eyes fixed us, then the jaguar was off into the jungle with one spring. The deer was untouched, possibly because the jaguar had scented us, possibly because we had arrived in the nick of time to save it. Jones ran

madly for his gun, seized it and started to rush blindly after the animal. When he had taken two or three steps the hammer caught roughly in a dangling vine and there was another enormous explosion, covering Jones with smoke and powder. Luckily the gun had been pointing in the air, but it was not Jones's fault that he had not been blown to pieces. He had been carrying the gun by the barrel, half-dragging its long stock after him, and the great blast of scrap iron must have come very close to his head. He paid not the slightest attention to this, but stood swearing horribly in Zambu at the loss of the jaguar. It was the only thing that interested him at all. He had very strong sporting instincts.

When we finally started on our way back towards the village, Jones was broody and preoccupied at the thought of the jaguar's escape, and was all for following it and doing our best with revolvers. It seemed to us rather a vain hope and probably a great waste of time. We pushed on doggedly towards the Guarunta.

In the middle of the afternoon, just after the full heat of the sun had broken, we found ourselves back in the village. Down on the river, lying in the *pipanto*, was John, who had been left behind to look after our things. No one showed any surprise that we had not returned the night before, as we had said we would ; time in Mosquitia is far too unimportant for anyone to notice the passage of a day or so. There was still plenty of time before dark, so we paid Jones with a large amount of salt and some tobacco, loaded the meat into the

boat and pushed off again into the full stream of the Guarunta.

By this time we had lost track of the days and we had no idea of the date. All the notes we had made, and the laborious diaries, were somewhere in the river or perhaps by now out in the Caribbean. During the journeys from village to village, and when there was nothing of moment to stand out, the days seemed endless and numberless. We had grown lackadaisical and careless, abandoning the discipline that had been maintained in the expedition for the first two or three days after we had arrived in Mosquitia. Now we took things as they came, without very much enthusiasm and with no surprise. Although we knew that we might well have missed our *rendez-vous* with Captain Macdonald, we did not really care; it was a far-off event, too remote to be a cause for concern. We drifted along as the river took us.

But as we drew nearer to the coast the freshness of the sea gave life to the stagnant airs of the jungle, and we began to stir ourselves. From time to time we had fits of energy in which we paddled madly, driving the boat on even faster than it was carried by the current. During the last reaches, when the river was broad and sandy, we tried travelling through the night without a stop. There were three of us and it was easy enough to sleep in turns. The first time we tried it there was a full moon that threw a bright cold light over the river, picking out rocks and sand-banks as clearly as the daylight. In the stern of the boat we kept a pole handy

to frighten the alligators away. It was simple, and that first night we went very well. For several more nights we drifted on magically through the moonlight, far pleasanter than day-time travel in the fierce sun.

Later, however, when the moon had gone, we tried again. We still had one of the torches we had used for stalking in the jungle, and fixed in the bows of the boat it picked out a bright yellow segment of clear water. It was easy to see what was immediately ahead, but the glare threw a sort of light haze over the water so that one could not see any distance in front of the boat. Carried by a current of four or five knots this was not enough ; for by the time an obstruction was seen the bow of the boat was practically into it. The first thing we hit, with a yielding jar, was the long snout of an alligator that was lying motionless in the water, fascinated by the light. There was a moment's pandemonium while the water was threshed white around us and the boat nearly capsized, then the alligator disappeared. We found that the powerful beam of light had the same effect upon alligators as it had had upon the animals in the jungle ; they stared at it as if hypnotized. All along the river we saw pairs of eyes over black snouts, glinting in the reflected light. We had no more bullets to waste so we left them in peace. After that we drifted through the night only when there was a moon.

Of the rest of those days, drifting down the Guarunta, there is little to tell. We were busy whenever we wanted to be, doing snatches of insignificant tasks ; we were

lazy and well fed. As we drew near to Caratasca the tropical apathy began to leave us, gradually, and we looked forward to reaching the Lagoon ; we had been long enough in Mosquitia.

Chapter Eighteen

CARATASCA

I DO not know when we reached Caratasca Lagoon. There was no moment in our progress when we could point to a transition between river and lagoon. For days the Guarunta had widened, swamplands appeared on either side of us and gradually the banks fell away and merged into the line of the coast. The main river had split up into narrow channels that twisted their own ways tortuously through the marshes, sometimes running together and forming great sandy lakes. Away from the channels of the river-mouth everything was stagnant and stinking, black soft mud that bubbled and heaved. Taller than ourselves grew high marsh grass, making a separate river of each channel and enclosing the fœtid airs so that the fresh breezes from the sea could not blow them away. Here on the mud-flats there were swarms of alligators, larger than those of the inland rivers. They lay basking smugly in the sun, armoured feet sinking a little way into the soft surface slime. From time to time one of them would look around with evil red eyes, then lunge suddenly forward and splash into the water. In a few places we saw flamingoes, squatting strangely on tall conical nests.

For a whole day we were in the swamp, drifting slowly seawards. The air was heavy and putrid.

Before long we began to paddle in spite of the heat, to reach the open water as soon as possible. All that day the sun beat down fiercely, till what land there was around us shimmered in the heat-haze and stale vapours rose from the bogs.

In the evening we were clear. Suddenly the marsh-lands sank under water and we found ourselves whirled outwards into the great lagoon. A strong breeze was blowing onshore, brushing the lagoon water into tiny white caps that broke and foamed under the bows of the *pipanto*.

In great breaths we drew in the fresh salt air of the Caribbean to drive the stagnation of the long marshes from our lungs. After so many weeks inland with no air stirring it was a relief to catch the invigorating tang of the sea breeze. We were so pleased at the sudden change that we paddled on at once recklessly across the lagoon, now stirred up into short choppy waves. The *pipanto* was far from seaworthy, but we felt suddenly ready for anything.

Half-way across the lagoon the short steep waves began to break into our flat bows, and we shipped water faster than John could bail it with his empty baked-bean tin. We cursed ourselves for starting so stupidly across the water, when anyone could have seen the wind coming. Frantically Nigel and I paddled while John bailed. We began to ship water, green over the low gunwale, and before long the boat was half-full, riding lower and lower in the water. I threw my paddle down and set to bailing with John. We could not make much impression on the flood of water that

was already in the boat, but there was a chance of keeping her afloat until we reached the sand-spit that enclosed the lagoon on the seaward side. By this time we were a bare thirty yards from it ; there would have been no difficulty in swimming for it if the worst came to the worst, and the water was rough enough to be safe from alligators.

As we ran the boat up on the soft sand it was water-logged, and in another moment or so we should have sunk. We dragged it high up on the beach and started to build a fire around which we could dry ourselves and our provisions.

The seaward edge of Caratasca Lagoon is a long sand bar, in some places about twenty-five yards wide, and in others reaching as much as seventy-five or a hundred. Along the centre line, on the highest part, lies a long straggling row of palm trees that stand out for miles against the empty horizon. There is nothing but an immense expanse of golden sand, running as far as the eye can see on each side ; in front the deep cobalt of the Caribbean, behind the flat grey-green of the lagoon water. Along the far side of the lagoon runs a low black ridge of land with an occasional tall palm standing out over it. It gives an impression of wildness and the utmost desertion, as if no human influence had ever reached it. On the sand-bar we had no protection but the slight rise of contour in the centre. We sheltered from the wind as best we could behind a dune and settled down for the night. Now that we had reached land we found that we were dead tired, stiff from paddling and sore from long immersion in the water.

We slept at once, the heavy drugged sleep of physical exhaustion.

In the night the strong wind died suddenly, leaving a flat calm. The first rays of light woke us to an incredible dawn. The whole of the eastern sky was livid red, and long purple fingers ran along the rim of the horizon casting a saffron glow over the heavens. There was not a breath of air ; and we noticed at once that the vultures and buzzards had gone from the sky. The Caribbean, too, had changed overnight ; yesterday it had broken in long blue rollers along the beach, now there was nothing but an immense oily swell. The seas rolled up like beaten lead, grey and solid. Nowhere was there a sign of white foam. As far as we could see the Caribbean stretched in slick heaving undulations. Inland, the lagoon lay flat and strangely glassy.

There was no doubt in my mind that a hurricane was brooding somewhere over the ocean and that before long it would whirl inland and tear hell out of the jungle. Those who are experienced with tropical hurricanes can often tell from the position of the winds roughly what course the centre of the cyclone will take, for they move in a characteristic circular direction. We had no barometer and knew next to nothing about the climate ; but there was no doubt as to what it was. John confirmed our opinion and stared uneasily at the sky. He had lived all his life in the hurricane area, and had seen them almost every year. He had seen Indian huts whirled up into the vortex of the winds and

carried away, he had seen miles of dense jungle crushed and twisted by a single blast. He had all the Zambu's reverence for the powers of the 'Great Winds.'

Philosophically we sat in the sand to watch the beginnings of nature's tattoo. There was no reason to suppose that it would come across the lagoon; and if it chose to do so there was certainly nothing we could do about it. It is only the whirling cyclonic centre of the hurricane that is so immeasurably dangerous; outside its course there are violent winds, but they blow straight and cannot wrench houses from their foundations and great trees from their roots. As the sun rose the blood-red streaks of dawn began to fade away, but the warning saffron glow had spread over all the sky. Apart from the deep rumble of the swell there was absolute silence. There was still no breath of wind; the long palm leaves hung still and limp from the trees. Once a coconut fell with a dull thud into the sand, startling us unreasonably; then again there was quiet.

The nearest land to us lay several miles to the north-west, along the length of the sand-spit. But between us the spit narrowed, so that if the wind caught us on our way towards the land we should have been worse off still. The sand was soft and bone dry, so that one sank deep into it, and the going was very difficult.

Along the other way, however, the bar seemed to grow wider; and since our *rendez-vous* with Macdonald was several miles away in that direction, at the lagoon-mouth, we decided to make our way along until we came to more solid shelter or the wind set in to blow.

We poled the boat along just off shore until we reached what we judged was the highest part of the sand-spit. There was still that unnatural calm over everything and the hot air was heavy in our lungs, but we knew that hell might break loose between one minute and the next. Under the lee of the sand-dunes we made a rough breastwork and dug ourselves in behind the *pipanto*. If the wind was to be dangerous, it would come from the seaward side, so we made our camp just over the rise on the lagoon side of the spit.

A little after midday the wind hit us suddenly with the violence of an explosion, then it set in to blow in a steady beat from the south-east, so that it struck diagonally across our sand-bar from the seaward side. With it came sand and stones that hurtled into the back of our shelter and formed a strong wall behind us as we had intended, to protect us in case the Caribbean began to wash across the bar into the lagoon. From the open side we saw the lagoon water suddenly lashed to fury. As its shallow muddy bed was sucked up the water turned brown, then a deep burnt red. We settled down to wait till it was over, watching the tall palms on the distant mainland whipping and straining against the hurricane. With a noise like a muffled pistol-shot a tree crashed down, fifty yards from us along the spit.

The violence of the wind increased steadily; we could hear nothing but the roar as it beat across the water. Sand and stones began to roll over the top of the shelter, which was by now well banked up at the back, and fell into a rapidly rising drift in front of us. From time to time we scooped it away to keep the

doorway free. In the afternoon, rather late, there happened a thing which we had been expecting; the sand behind us grew damp, and underfoot appeared little pools of sea water. The seas had been mounting higher and higher on the sand-bank; now they were beginning to seep through to the lagoon. For a while after that the wind remained constant, and the gradual flow of water did not increase. We remained damp and salt-sore, but thankful that it was no worse.

In the evening we found that the stove was dry enough to light without much difficulty, and we cooked part of the meat that was left unspoiled. It was wet and rather salt; but we had eaten nothing since the day before. We boiled muddy lagoon water and drank it eagerly.

That night there was no sleep; the wind roared on in steady fury, but no more water drained through to us. We sat looking out over the turbulent darkness of the lagoon, unable to see the maelstrom we could hear. By midnight the wind was slightly less strong, and we knew that the storm-centre was no nearer to us, perhaps by this time several hundred miles away. Later on, before the first rays of red light, the wind died out suddenly and left a dead quiet that was loud after the steady roar of the night. As dawn broke we fell asleep where we were, and slept in peace till the early afternoon.

When we stretched our cramped legs and stepped out of the shelter, the sky was clear again but the water was still troubled. The lagoon was muddy red, and remained so for over a week; the Caribbean rolled in

again in the same oily leaden swell. The wind had completely gone, leaving a fresh salt air that drowned the fœtid vapours of the distant marshlands. With relief we dug the boat out, floated it and loaded what was left of our scanty provisions. Before nine o'clock we were afloat, paddling and poling strongly along the straight edge of the sand-spit.

Almost immediately after the wind faded away, the vultures appeared again overhead, a sure enough sign that the hurricane was well on its way elsewhere. We had been only on the very edge of it, catching the mild backlash of the cyclone ; the centre at the time must have been many miles out to sea. Later we found out that it had caused a good deal of trouble. Two ships were disabled on its fringes ; it had swept across the Tortugas and left them even drier and more desolate than before ; then it had whirled mischievously on across the West Indies, finally losing itself in the South Atlantic *via* Key West. It had missed Mosquitia, where the flimsy Indian huts in the jungle and the coastal plantations were probably too easy game.

We poled along all day towards the Guarunta Bar, keeping close to the beach and climbing the sand-bank from time to time to watch for the *Perla del Mar*. If Macdonald had been caught off shore, he would not have stood much chance ; but he knew the Caribbean well, and at the first sign of hurricane he would have run out to sea.

In the middle of the next day we reached the break in the sand-bar where sea joined lagoon and the muddy

waters of the Guarunta flowed through, piling up great shoals on the coral reefs that lay outside. Like the Patuca Bar at Brewer's, it was a tricky passage with no markings, and the reefs lay just under water so that in a flat calm they were quite hidden. Even Macdonald had never been through here ; he had called once or twice but had always anchored off shore. At the south end of the spit stood an untidy cluster of Carib houses, once thatched in high sloping gables. Now they stood awry in storm-swept confusion. A few palm trees lay half-fallen across the village.

Neither of us spoke any Carib, and John knew only a few words. We paddled up to the village and a coal black Carib came running to meet us, astonishment in every muscle of his face. He turned to the huts and shouted, bringing half a dozen more blacks to stare and chatter at this unexpected visit. In the centre of the village glowed a large wood fire, and thick black smoke curled up slowly into the still air.

There was no need, we found, to worry about the language question. The man who had seen us first spoke good Coast English—fast dialect with a Jamaican intonation, rather like the language of the Bay Islands. Eagerly we asked him for news of a schooner. He shook his head.

' Only schooner come here,' he shouted, ' him b'long Cap'n Macdonald. He no come three months——'

Thank heaven for that, we thought ; at any rate we had not missed him. It remained to be seen, by what turned out to be a very long wait, whether he had been out in the hurricane. . . .

We went ashore and walked up to the battered Carib village. At close quarters the damage was more serious than it had looked from a distance ; none of the roofs were left, and most of the houses were twisted hopelessly around their slender bamboo pillars. Most of them also showed gaping holes, where the plaited palm-leaf walls had been blown away. One of the tall palms that had fallen across the village lay supported by the crushed remains of a hut. The Caribs, like the other Mosquito folk, are used to hurricanes and they had been able to smell this one coming for days, long before we had noticed anything untoward in the air. Accordingly they had left their huts, and none of them were hurt. They regarded it more as a nuisance than a calamity.

We dragged the *pipanto* well up on the sand and prepared for a long wait. There was no shelter, since most of the Carib huts were destroyed ; but it was very fine and they told us that out here on the bar there were neither sand-flies nor mosquitoes. After many plagued weeks of constant bites this was the best of news.

There was nothing else for us to do, so we set to helping the Caribs rebuild the village. At first they were shy, a little chary of this gratuitous help. Most of the white men they had met were bandits from the frontier, and I think that at some time they had probably been badly treated. Soon they saw that we left our guns in the boat and that we wanted nothing from them, and they gratefully gave us presents of food : dried deer meat, very compact and nutritive ; fermented coconut milk ; and quantities of fruit.

The Caratasca Caribs have a few contacts with civilization, yet they shun it like the plague and keep well away from the white population of the coast. They are simple retiring people, content to live quietly by fishing and growing a few small crops. From time to time, as laziness tempts them, they trade their things for the little conveniences of the outer world—knives, fish-hooks, nails and so on. When we set to building their houses we found American tools and wire, traded for fish and copra from the Island schooners. Among them also there were one or two guns, and probably well hidden somewhere there was ammunition, garnered from some of the mysterious shipments brought to the lagoon by the islanders and intended for the Nicaraguan border.

The big Carib who had greeted us soon became very friendly and entertained us at great length with tales of gun-running and revolution on the coast. As we had suspected he knew Macdonald well, and had worked with him ; he seemed a little offended when we told him our reason for being in Mosquitia, at our lack of confidence. His name was Tom, Black Tom as he said they called him along the coast. For years he had been in Belize, where he had learnt English ; he had worked on the Island schooners running arms and liquor ; but finally he had returned to his own people, as Caribs will.

When the village was rebuilt, after four or five days, Black Tom told us that one of the huts had been cleared for us and that we were welcome to it. By that time we were rather fond of sleeping in the open, lying in the soft sand ; but it was an offer that we could hardly

refuse. We moved in with profuse and exaggerated thanks that pleased them enormously. It was a fine clean house, built in the Carib fashion with a high pointed roof of palm leaves that was proof against the thickest tropical rains. For eight more days we lived with the Caribs, eating their food and sitting round the great fire in the dark while they sang strangely wild chants. Their voices were soft but high-pitched and lilting. Once or twice Black Tom explained the songs they sang. Most of them were ancient, and he knew neither what they meant nor from where they had come ; but a few were younger, and had evidently been born since the Caribs had settled along the lagoon. In dialect, Carib or Zambu, Caratasca means '*Great Crocodile*,' and they sang interminably of the crocodile who lived in the lagoon, father and mother of all mankind. Verse followed verse, changing rapidly from praise to lament and from supplication to love. There was little rhythm in their song, but an ever-varying tune that followed the mood of the verse. For many hours we sat silently listening to them, watching the red glow of the fire flickering on the smooth ebony of their bodies. They stared into the smouldering embers, with faces that were calm and unquestioning, and sang on late into the night.

Finally a Carib girl came running to us, early one morning, and told us that there was a schooner on the horizon. We ran out and looked ; the Caribbean was as flat as polished glass and after a moment we saw a tiny fleck of white glinting on the rim of the world. It

was the sail of a boat, but whether it was the *Perla del Mar* we could not tell. It might be Macdonald ; if it was he had bought his boat a new suit of sails. Those we had seen before had been filthy, roughly patched and nearly black.

All the Caribs came running to the beach with baskets of fish and copra, laughing and shouting wildly as they watched the schooner in. These days were the great days of their lives.

By the middle of the morning we knew that it was the *Perla del Mar* and we could even make out the little wooden galley, rebuilt after the last squall, hanging far out over her flat counter. Her three heavy sails were drawing and presently we heard the Diesel. Outside the line of reefs she stopped and the roar of anchor chains floated across the water, echoing to the far side of the lagoon. In wild excitement the Caribs jumped into their *cayukas* and paddled out to the schooner.

Captain Macdonald came ashore and greeted us laconically. ' Glad to see you got here,' he said, chewing the stub of a black cigar and looking over the sad remains of our kit. ' I bet the mate ten *pesos* you would ! '

From his hip pocket he brought out a flask and insisted on a drink to celebrate our reunion. It was good whisky and for several weeks now we had drunk nothing but tepid water and coconut milk.

While we sat on the sand and told Macdonald the story of our journey, the mate was bargaining with the Caribs, buying copra and selling odds and ends. The

Perla del Mar rolled easily in the light swell. We sat lazily looking out over the Caribbean stretching away unbroken to the east for so many thousands of miles. On our left the long sand-bar ran out to merge into the black line of land that we knew was Cape Gracias á Dios. The beach was dazzling white, the sky and water shades of cobalt in the sun. There was an impression of unreality and infinite remoteness about this utterly desolate beauty that made one think of the ends of the earth. It conjured up pictures of the days of the Spanish Main, when pirate frigates sailed here and buccaneers were marooned on sand-bars not unlike this one upon which we lay. Away far over the horizon lay the Bay Islands, for years a pirate *cache* ; and beyond them to the north-east were the Antilles and the Dry Tortugas. In a flood of romanticism we thought of these things that work had until now crowded from our imaginations. We looked across at the Captain, who certainly did his best to maintain some of the better traditions of the Spanish Main. He was fast asleep in the sand, a red bandana handkerchief across his face.

By the evening the copra loading was not finished, so we agreed with Macdonald that we might as well wait until the morning before setting sail for La Ceiba. One day, after tropical months, seems very insignificant.

John was very reluctant to leave us, and wanted to come on the schooner to La Ceiba. He was tired of being a Zambu, he told us, and wanted to see what lay beyond Mosquitia. Since joining us curiosity into the affairs of white civilization had bitten him badly, but there was little for a Zambu boy of his age to do in the

ports. We discouraged his enterprise and said we would take him as far as Brewer's Lagoon, where he could take our *pipanto* as a present and paddle himself back to his people on Cannon Island. The idea of having a boat of his own pleased him immensely and all thoughts of leaving the lagoons immediately vanished.

The next morning we sailed. From Macdonald we got tobacco and some tinned foods to reward the Caribs for their help during our stay in the village, and they brought us parting gifts of fruit. The whole village followed the schooner far out into the Caribbean, and until we were almost out of sight of land we could see their *cayukas* riding lightly over the swell. Away from the land, a strong breeze sprang up in the south and we set the new mainsail, which the Captain told us with pride had been cut at Roatán by his women-folk. Most of the Island women are skilled sailmakers and have made sails for the schooners for several generations.

That evening, just after dark, we ran along the coast close to the beach to watch for the Brewer's inlet. The shore-line is so low and level that nothing stands out as a landmark. Above the land there are a few straggling palms silhouetted against the sky, but nothing more. The sea was flat and in the late afternoon the wind had died away. We sat on the low bulwarks trailing our toes in the water and watching the long black ribbon of desolate land unfolding on our port hand. As it grew darker Macdonald made out to sea to clear the great banks of silt piled off Cape Gracias á Dios by the Patuca ; then he altered course again to port to round

the cape. We strained our eyes to catch a glimpse of a break in the flat line of land.

By midnight we had still not found it, and we must have been as far along the coast as Ebony Lagoon or even farther. We went about and ran back the beach again, watching intently ; but it was no use. There was no moon, and the last glow of sunset which might have picked out the gap against the western sky had vanished. At about two o'clock we ran in as close as we dared and dropped anchor.

At dawn we saw that the Brewer's Lagoon inlet was not fifty yards down the coast from where we had anchored. There was a slight breeze blowing that ruffled the water, and the reefs outside the inlet were clearly lined with fringes of white foam. With the Diesel running dead slow we ran through the passage and dropped anchor again, after nearly four months, outside the *Comandante's* wooden shack.

No sooner had the sails been stowed away than there occurred a calamity that had happened to us before, and which we had expected to happen again ; the *Comandante* of Mosquitia, who had given us *Aguardiente* and black cigars on our last visit to the lagoon, saw us on deck and at once came paddling furiously out to the schooner. He clambered over the rail and shook my hand. '*Caramba, Señor Quina, que tal!*'

We shook hands with him for some time then went ashore with him to his house for a drink, because there was no way of politely avoiding it. He drew up three chairs, chased the children and hens from the room,

and shouted to his flat-footed *Señora* for coffee. While she was making it he brought out the *Guarro* bottle from a cupboard, and then, running true to form, passed us a bundle of thick native *puros*. I bit a full inch off mine in an effort to make it smaller ; my stomach was weak after the diet of the last months, and I doubted whether I could survive the ordeal that we already knew so well.

For two hours we sat with the *Comandante*, while outside Macdonald did obscure business with the Caribs, talking endlessly over it in the fashion of the Caribbean. It was a welcome relief when we heard the faint popping of a small motor-boat somewhere in the distance. The *Comandante* had told us that Clayton Cooke from the other side of the lagoon had the only outboard motor in the neighbourhood ; this must be a visitor. The old man caught the sound some time after we did, and sat straining his ears a little drunkenly, trying to decide where it was. We went out to the beach and looked across the lagoon. There was nothing in sight but the schooner, and around her the close cluster of *cayukas*. The *Comandante* ran back for his telescope, and we walked along the sand to the end of the spit that enclosed the outlet to the sea. Near us there was no sign of a craft ; but presently Don Tomás caught sight of a motor-boat struggling along the shore from the direction of Cape Gracias á Dios. He levelled his telescope unsteadily and told us that there was only one man in the boat, and that undoubtedly he must be a bandit or a revolutionary escaping from Nicaragua. Here was his longed-for chance of exerting real authority.

Again he ran back to the *Comandancia*, and returned buckling a revolver belt and a leather bandolier of looped cartridges around his middle. The motor-boat was rapidly approaching the passage and the noise of its motor, which had carried for miles across the still lagoon, grew constantly louder. I thought it only fair, after a while, to remind Don Tomás that as a piece of elementary strategy he should load the enormous revolver which he had begun to flourish. Finally the Nicaraguan arrived, steered his boat cautiously and skilfully through the reefs, and tied up below the *Comandancia* while Don Tomás stood importantly on his doorstep, gun in hand.

The stranger stepped ashore with a loud and dramatic cry of '*Viva Carías!*' This took some of the wind from the bulging sails of the *Comandante's* importance ; here was a loyalist, greeting him with the official formula. But if he could not be belligerent, he could be suspicious, and the disappointing visitor was cross-examined for some time with a good deal of repetition and inconsequence. He stood barefooted in the sand, a smallish stout man with a shiny bald head. He wore tight alpaca trousers, a singlet, and a leather shoulder holster which held a revolver with a smart mother-of-pearl handle. At last the *Comandante* was either bored or satisfied ; the Nicaraguan bandit was a loyal Honduran who had escaped from a political sentence in Nicaragua. Don Tomás turned to us apologetically.

'*En Mosquitia hay muy mal hombres*,' he said.

The bandit, as we continued to think of him, was invited to the house and the *Comandante*, laying his gun

on the table, introduced us with the age-old formula of Spanish courtesy.

'*Tengo el honor dr presentarle a Vd. dos gran scientistas, que vienen de Inglaterra. . . .*'

The bandit shook us warmly by the hand. '*Mucho gusto, Señor. Tanto gusto, Señores. . . .*' The *Comandante's* fanciful introduction had created a profound impression. He too, was very interested in science; and at home his wife, who could read, had many books. He hoped to go with us to La Ceiba on the schooner, and doubtless on the way we should have some interesting discussions. . . .

After innumerable *copas* and *copitas* of the *Comandante's* fire-water, and after healths had been drunk to all those present and to a number of others, we were relieved to hear a shout from the Captain. The loading was done, and he was ready to weigh anchor. In spite of our first feeling of relief it suddenly came to us that this was the end, that our expedition was over and that before long we should be back in La Ceiba. Now that the time had come to start on the last lap of our return to civilization, there came a flat feeling of regret. Our time was up and in a few minutes Mosquitia would be behind us.

Partly on account of this and partly, perhaps, as a result of the *Comandante's* drinks, we shook hands with him very warmly and at inordinate length, promising that we would come back again as soon as we could, and that we would certainly remember him to the President in Tegucigalpa.

We paddled out across the flat water of Brewer's

Lagoon for the last time, climbed over the low gunwale of the schooner, and presently the Diesel began to throb and Captain Macdonald steered slowly out over the bar.

Of the rest there is little to tell. We sailed uneventfully through a glassy sea to La Ceiba, where we were received with an enormous display of knowing suspicion. We were tired and our equipment was gone ; and we had spent all our money. A week later Nigel was on his way to Australia and I was working my way back to England as a supercargo on a banana boat.

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